

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Title of Thesis The Bristol Dispute of 1794-95, a Crucial Issue in Early
Methodism, With a Clarification and an Assessment of the
Part Played by Joseph Benson.

The purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the events and clarify the issues involved in the Bristol Dispute. Special concern is given to the role of Joseph Benson, because it has been misunderstood and unappreciated.

The sacramental problem behind the Dispute arose from the desire for Methodist preachers to administer the Lord's Supper and its clash with the traditional Methodist-Anglican relationship during the Wesleyan era. After Wesley's death the tension between conservative Churchmen, who resisted the sacramental innovation, and liberal Sacramentarians, who favoured the innovation, became acute. The contention centred around two issues which succeeded in obscuring the essential basis of disagreement, *i.e.* the sacramental innovation. The issue "Church union vs. Church separation" arose when Churchmen, becoming alarmed over the innovation's threat to the Church relation, accused the Sacramentarians of fostering a separation from the Church. The issue "Trustee power vs. Conference authority" arose when Sacramentarians, becoming alarmed over conservative trustees' resistance to Conference granting sacramental concessions, accused trustees of trying to usurp Conference authority. In reality both parties favoured the Church relation and both were loyal to Conference authority; the keynote to their actions was their attitudes on the sacramental innovation.

A Connexional crisis was precipitated at Bristol when the Room trustees expelled Henry Moore from their chapels for administering the Sacrament at nearby Portland Chapel. Although the friction in Bristol developed from the clash between Conservatives and Liberals there, the expulsion of Moore was prompted by personal reasons rather than by a view to check the sacramental innovation. However, Moore and the Portland party publicly interpreted the expulsion as an attempt on the part of the trustees to usurp Conference's right to appoint preachers, and they made plans to erect a new chapel to supercede those of the Room trustees.

When Joseph Benson arrived in Bristol to assume charge of the circuit, he found that both parties had violated Conference regulations and was unwilling to sanction either. His attempt to reconcile the two parties failed when the concessions of the Room party were rejected. Moreover, the Portland party warned Benson with an expulsion from Portland Chapel if he should preach for the Room trustees. Yet Benson felt obliged to fulfill his appointment to preach in all the Bristol chapels and was accordingly expelled from Portland. This occasioned a split in the circuit with two of the Bristol preachers supporting Benson, while preachers from outside the circuit came in to help Moore.



The opposing parties in Bristol circulated printed letters throughout the Connexion explaining the dispute and charging the other of violating Conference authority. Thus, the local flare-up soon spilled over to produce a Connexional crisis. From September 1794 until February 1795 a polemical war raged with circulars appearing from all parts of the Connexion; the supporters of the Portland party inflated the action of the Room trustees by accusing trustees throughout the Connexion of planning to destroy Conference authority, while the supporters of the Room party condemned the Portland party for expelling Benson and for erecting an unauthorised chapel.

By the month of February the Connexion had grown weary of dispute, yet many were still apprehensive over a possible division in the Connexion. During the months leading up to the sitting of the 1795 Conference the main figures in Bristol successively met to consider a plan of settlement. Several plans were proposed, but they were beneficial not so much in bringing a settlement as in establishing a conciliatory climate. The 1795 Conference met in July and brought an end both to the dispute in Bristol and to the crisis in the Connexion by adopting what is known as the Plan of Pacification. This plan re-affirmed Conference authority and its right to station preachers, and it established clear-cut conditions for the sacramental innovation in the individual societies which were agreeable to both parties.

THE BRISTOL DISPUTE OF 1794-95, A CRUCIAL ISSUE IN EARLY
METHODISM, WITH A CLARIFICATION AND AN ASSESSMENT OF THE
PART PLAYED BY JOSEPH BENSON

This Thesis is submitted
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by

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FOREWORD

My research on this thesis began with the subject of "Joseph Benson, His Life, Work and Thought". After several months of investigation I reviewed my collected material and found that one important episode in Benson's life, connected with the Bristol Dispute of 1794-95, was not only unclear but that the evidence in all secondary sources appeared incongruent with other known information about the man. Unfortunately both of Benson's biographers have avoided the details of the subject, and my search for Benson's memoirs proved unfruitful. With my interest heightened over the mystery of this episode, I turned to the archives of the Methodist Book Room in London in hopes of a solution. Since the cataloguing system was not adequate, I decided to examine every book in the archives which was related to or even remotely suggested my subject. Fortunately I located an old scrap book, stuck behind one of the shelves, which contained a collection of circulars printed during the period of the dispute. And this along with other material uncovered many pertinent aspects of the problem. A picture was beginning to unfold.

My next logical move was to journey to Bristol, the scene of the original disturbance and especially to inquire at John Wesley's Chapel in the Broadmead, originally known as the "New Room" or the "Room". To my great satisfaction Mr. Fox, the caretaker, and the

Rev. Donald Streat, the warden, made available to me several extant manuscripts, relating to the subject. Likewise, a visit to nearby Portland Chapel was rewarded by Mr. Pople, the caretaker, allowing me the use of the Chapel's (1793-1856) financial account book.

Perhaps my best fortune came when I met the Rev. Dr. R. G. Ashman at a religious service at the Y.M.C.A., for Dr. Ashman arranged for me to meet the Rev. A. T. Johns who was kind enough to loan me the deeds of both Portland and King Street Chapels and in addition a most valuable minute book of the latter Chapel. To facilitate my understanding of these 18th Century deeds, Dr. Ashman recommended that I contact Mr. Guy Heal, the solicitor for Bristol Methodism. Mr. Heal was most helpful in this, but over and beyond this he did research at the city of Bristol's archives regarding the deeds of the "New Room" and later was kind enough to send a copy of this research on to me.

With the benefit of this and other evidence I felt that I might be able to reconstruct the events of the dispute. At the same time a picture of the role of Joseph Benson was emerging which, while clarifying and revealing that this episode in his life was consistent with other features known about the man, also showed how significant Benson was in the dispute.

Believing that a comprehensive treatment of the dispute with an evaluation of Benson's role would be a better contribution to historical research and would also preserve my original subject, I consulted my two advisers Professors Hugh Watt and Charles Duthie

for advice. Both gave their approval, and so upon the suggestion of the former, I altered my subject to the title: "The Bristol Dispute of 1794-95, a Crucial Issue in Early Methodism, with a Clarification and an Assessment of the Part Played by Joseph Benson".

The purpose of the thesis, therefore, is to establish the facts involved in the Bristol Dispute and to evaluate the role of Joseph Benson. Earlier treatments have made but slight mention of Benson, and in these accounts Benson's conduct has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is reasonable to assume that scholars have been embarrassed over the role so eminent a man as Benson appeared to play, and their lack of consideration of him was probably intentional. Therefore this investigation will not only attempt to reconstruct and clarify the issues and events in the dispute itself, but it will endeavour to rescue and assess the significance of the role of Joseph Benson.

Although the period of concern is 1794-95, the dispute is located in the context of a period of transition (1791-95) following the death of John Wesley, while its basic problem is rooted in the earlier Wesleyan era (1740-91). The unsatisfactory conditions for Methodist reception of the Lord's Supper in the Anglican Church during the earlier era created the tension which serves as the general background for the dispute, while the interaction between those who desired an independent use of the Sacrament and those who resisted it during the later transition period provides its immediate context. Therefore the scope of the thesis must include the

emergence of the sacramental problem and its development into the circumstances which finally caused the flare-up in Bristol and the crisis in the Methodist Connexion.

CHAPTER ONE

The Life of Joseph Benson

Perhaps it will appear unusual to the reader to find a chapter on the life of Benson preceding the body of the thesis. It has been indicated that the present writer was motivated to investigate the present subject after learning that other investigators had interpreted Benson's conduct in a way which seemed contradictory to the known features of the man's life. In particular these sources treat him as a "High Churchman" who took his stand in the affair on the basis of his opposition to the sacramental innovation. This position, which is both a misrepresentation of the man and a misinterpretation of the facts, is one of the essential problems of the present work. Hence a separate section on Benson is necessary for the thesis and also for an examination of the secondary sources. On the one hand since it would be illogical to interrupt the progression of the thesis later with this section, and on the other hand since it is vital for the next chapter dealing with the secondary material, it is expedient to give a brief account of Benson's life and a description of his stand regarding the sacramental innovation at this point.

Joseph Benson, the son of John and Isabella Benson, was born on January 25, 1748, at Melmerby in the parish of Kirk Oswald and the county of Cumberland.¹ From the beginning, the Bensons purposed

¹The information in this chapter, unless footnoted otherwise, is taken from: James Macdonald, Memoirs of the Rev. Joseph Benson. London, T. Blanshard, 1822, and Richard Treffry, Memoirs of the Rev. Joseph Benson. London, John Mason, 1840.

their son for the ministry in the Established Church, and so at an early age Isabella began in earnest to give her son rigorous religious instruction. Joseph, who was a quiet and serious child, rarely enjoying the games of other children of his own age, was an eager student. His religious education was further enhanced when at the age of nine he was placed under the tutorage of a Mr. Dean, a Presbyterian minister, who instructed him in Latin, Greek and theology.

At sixteen his cousin, Joseph Watson, gave him a volume of John Wesley's sermons which turned his interest to the Methodist movement. A year later in 1765 hearing that Wesley was preaching in Newcastle, he set out on foot for this city. Apparently Wesley had left prior to Benson's arrival; but the two did meet in London sometime prior to March 1766, because on March 11th, Wesley appointed Benson classical master at his school at Kingswood.¹

While at Kingswood Benson inaugurated a schedule which he seems to have followed throughout his life:

To rise at four o'clock in the morning, and go to bed at nine at night. Never to trifle away time in vain conversation, useless visits, or studying anything which would not be to my advantage.

To be careful to maintain private prayer, and not to be content without communion with God in it. To spend from four to five o'clock every morning, and from five to six every evening, in devout meditation and prayer: and at nine in the morning, and at three in the evening, to devote a few minutes to prayer.²

¹John Telford, The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley. London, The Epworth Press, 1931, Vol.V, p.79.

²Macdonald, p.13.

As he had not abandoned his hope of obtaining orders in the Established Church, he registered at Oxford on March 16, 1769, while he was still engaged at Kingswood school, making frequent visits to Oxford when the time afforded.

He remained at Kingswood until the spring of 1770 when he accepted an appointment as classical master at Lady Huntingdon's college, Trevecca. His services at Trevecca ended when the Countess on January 17, 1771, dismissed him for refusing to sign a declaration which denounced the Arminian affirmations declared in the Minutes of Wesley's 1770 Conference.

Leaving Trevecca, he returned to Oxford to engage himself in full time work on his degree. Upon his arrival, he received a message from his tutor declaring that since he had heard of Benson's Methodist connections, he could no longer serve as his tutor nor sign his testimonials for orders in the Church. Immediately following this, Benson received testimonials from a clergyman in Wales, but the presiding bishop refused to interview him on the alleged ground of his not having an academic degree. These two incidents appeared to Benson to indicate that it was not God's will for him to enter orders in the Church, and so when John Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, proposed on March 22, 1771, that he should become his curate, he declined¹, and turned his attention to John Wesley and was received as a Methodist itinerant preacher.

¹See Wesley's Letters, V, p.228.

The first two years of his itinerancy were spent in London and in Newcastle. It was while serving in the latter place that he was pressed by Captain Webb to journey to America with him. Having the approval of John Fletcher, very likely he would have gone had he not received such strong objections from John and Charles Wesley, in which the latter declared: "At present your call is not clear; therefore stand still, and send our friends a loving, explicit refusal."¹

The next two years 1773-74 were spent in Edinburgh. Describing one of his usual days there, Benson says:

This day.....I was fully employed in reading, writing, visiting the sick, and the public exercises of religion. I was kept all the day in sweet peace of mind, but had not much joy, nor did I find such nearness to God as I did some days past. However, it is still my resolution to make his will my rule, and his favour my portion.....²

This portion of Benson's Journal enables one to catch a glimpse of the man's personal religion. All of Benson's energy was directed toward obedience to God's will, while his sensitivity to his failures created a guilt complex. The fusion of his achievements with his failings provoked a kind of joyless-peace-of-mind, and hence he writes, "At the same time, that I am assured.....I am heartily and feelingly ashamed of myself and all I am and do or have done."³ But Benson did not seek comfort from his anxiety or even

¹Ibid., VI, p.20.

²Macdonald, p.39.

³Letter to his sister, W. L. Watkinson Collection, II:166.

joy in his religion; he sought only holiness and utter obedience. He says, "nor do I desire comfort so much as holiness"¹, "over and over did I dedicate myself"², "but, alas! I am still very unholy".³ His religion was summed up in obedience to God which "is.....the very end of our creation, preservation and redemption".⁴ And it was only natural that this should carry over into his preaching ministry.

If Benson's personal religion was encompassed by the "thou shalt" of God, then his preaching took the form of the "thou must". In his preaching, he did not use persuasion; rather he sought to impel his hearers with "you must, you must, you can not turn away from the will of God".⁵ Indeed, he approached repentance, faith, even sanctification and love all from the vantage point of "the will of God". But in doing so he did not overlook these Methodist doctrines, as evidenced by Conference choosing him in 1806 to draw up an official digest of the Methodist doctrines.⁶ And in the context of his own age, Benson was a most successful preacher, as evinced by his conversion of at least eleven who became Methodist

¹Macdonald, p.71.

²Ibid., p.163.

³Ibid., p.46.

⁴Joseph Benson, "The Substance of a Sermon, Preached at the New-Chapel, City-Road to the Children of the Methodist Sunday-Schools in London.....On Wit-Monday, May 25, 1801". London, G. Storey, 1801, pp.25-26.

⁵James Everett, Wesleyan Takings: or Centenary Sketches of Ministerial Character; as Exhibited in the Wesleyan Connexion, during the First Hundred Years of its Existence. London, Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1840, p.227.

⁶Minutes of the Methodist Conferences. London, Conference Office, 1812, I, pp.349-50.

preachers.¹

Following his itinerancy in Edinburgh, Benson spent the next five years (1775-1780) in the Newcastle, Bradford and Manchester circuits. At the first place he released his first publication², while at the latter place he passed through two important crises in his life.

The first of these crises related to his courtship with Sarah Thompson which began in July, 1779. Margeret Jemison has edited a collection of the letters that passed between Joseph and Sarah which provides a charming story of their romance.³ Apparently, Sarah's parents strongly objected to their daughter marrying a Methodist preacher, and in addition Benson could not expect financial assistance for a wife from the Conference.⁴ The wedding did take place at Leeds on January 28, 1780, but for Sarah who faced her family's opposition, it was an ordeal rather than a pleasure.⁵

¹Among those preachers converted by Benson were Edward Hare, Samuel Kittle, William Bramwell, Jabez Bunting, Marmaduke Revell, Charles Atmore, John Nelson, Edward Oakes, James Gill, William Radford, William Dawson. (See the Obituary sections of the Minutes of Conference.)

²A Short Account of the Death of Mrs. Mary Hutton of Sunderland. Newcastle, 1777.

³Margaret Jemison, A Methodist Courtship, Love Letters of Joseph Benson and Sarah Thompson, 1779-1780. Atlanta, Emory University, 1945.

⁴The increasing embarrassment over the Connexion's inability to support preachers' wives prompted the 1782 Conference to resolve that no more married preachers should be admitted into the Connexion.

⁵Letter from Sarah to Joseph dated Jan. 17, 1780, quoted in Jemison, A Methodist Courtship, p. 26.

A second episode, equally perplexing to Benson, occurred during the same period. Benson sent a letter to Joseph Cownley in the fall of 1779 expressing his view on the person of Christ, and in a second letter to this preacher Benson declares that the latter had "represented me as a confirm'd Arian to several of my friends".¹ Thomas Coke was particularly alarmed over this. J. W. Etheridge, in his biography of Thomas Coke, treats this affair between Benson and Coke in some detail. He quotes Benson's letter to the latter denying the charge,² but, says Etheridge, Coke was not satisfied and described Benson as "a subtle casuist, and therefore, holding such an error, a very dangerous man".³ However, Etheridge concludes that "Dr. Coke was himself in error", for Benson "was in the mental habit of recognising distinctions and differences of which more superficial believers are hardly cognisant. Mr. Benson's faith was like adamant for firmness, and for being without a flaw."⁴

Sometime prior to the sitting of the 1780 Conference Benson placed this charge before a committee of laymen who exonerated him.⁵ The matter was finally settled at the 1780 Conference when the committee of preachers which judged the case declared "I was no

¹W. L. Watkinson Collection, II: 170.

²J. W. Etheridge, The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke. London, John Mason, 1860, pp.65-66.

³Ibid., p.66.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Watkinson Collection, II: 174.

Arian"¹, and Dr. Coke "offered to ask my pardon before them all".² Yet three months later Benson was accused this time with deism, but again a committee examined the matter and acquitted him of the charge.³

The next four years (1780-1784) were spent in the Leeds and the Bradford circuits. At the former place the first of the eight children which Sarah bore him was born.⁴ And here he published a second work consisting of four sermons.⁵ While at the latter place which marked his third publication⁶, he strongly considered leaving the itinerant ministry to establish a boarding school. But he decided against it until "my family be so large.....as to render it very troublesome to remove from place to place".⁷

During 1784 and 1785 Benson was stationed in the Sheffield circuit where his labours rewarded him with a great popularity and an increase of over thirty-four per cent. in the circuit membership. Yet the following three years (1786-1789) spent in the Hull circuit

¹Macdonald, p.106.

²Ibid.

³MS. letter of Benson dated Nov.27, 1780, loaned to me by the Rev. Frank Baker.

⁴Only six of these survived to adulthood. Joseph (1780-1853) became a surgeon; John (d. 1860) became a clergyman at Norton-sub-Ham, Somerset; Ann (1786-1831) married Robert Mather and emigrated to Canada; Isabella (1788-1825) married Mr. Whytall; Sarah (b. 1794-98) married Mr. Hammond; and Samuel (1799-1881) became a clergyman at St. Saviours in Southwark, London.

⁵Four Sermons on the Second Coming of Christ, and the Future Misery of the Wicked. Leeds, J. Bowling, 1781.

⁶Two Sermons on Sanctification. Leeds, J. Bowling, 1782.

⁷Macdonald, p.135.

were crowned with greater success. Sarah Snowden writes in her memoirs that "he had not spent a month in Hull when the chapel was crowded to excess".¹ Another source declares that as a result of Benson's work "the society.....so increased as to render the erection of a larger chapel absolutely necessary".² The first of four publications which he issued while at Hull was his address at the opening of this new chapel.³

During the next two Conference years (1789 and 1790) he was stationed in the Birmingham circuit, and there he issued his eighth⁴ and ninth⁵ publications. The latter was a work begun by John Fletcher who had died before its completion. Since Fletcher's wife and Mr. Ireland, Fletcher's closest friend, disagreed on the person to finish this work, they compromised and selected Benson.⁶

¹William L. Thornton, "Memoirs of Mrs. Sarah Snowden", The Methodist Magazine, 1837, Vol. 60, p.891.

²W. H. Thompson, Early Chapters in Hull Methodism, 1746-1800. Hull, A.T.K. Fretwell, 1895, p.40.

³A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the New Chapel Belonging to the Methodists in Lowgate, Hull. Hull, G. Prince, 1787. The other three publications were:
A Scriptural Essay Towards the Proof of an Immortal Spirit in Man. Hull, G. Prince, 1788.
Remarks on Dr. Priestley's System of Materialism, Mechanism, and Necessity. Hull, G. Prince, 1788.
Two Sermons on the Nature and Design of the Gospel of Christ. Hull, G. Prince, 1788.

⁴A Letter from Mr. Benson to the Methodist Society in the Hull Circuit. Hull, T. Briggs, 1790.

⁵A Rational Vindication of the Catholic Faith. London, City-Road, 1790.

⁶Wesley's Letters, Vol.8, pp.375-76.

Of the final fourteen chapters, ten were the original work of Benson.

At the Manchester Conference of 1791, the first meeting after Wesley's death, Benson was chosen to address the assembly. The printing of this sermon brought the number of his publications to ten.¹ This Conference sent him to the Manchester circuit where he remained until 1794. During his itinerancy there he published a series of letters addressed to John Wesley on the Divinity of Christ.² Part of this work had been the work of John Fletcher, but the major part of it originated from Benson. Another publication was a defence of Methodism in reply to a Rev.^{D^e} Tatham's sermon entitled "A Sermon Suitable to the Times".³ Tatham accused Methodist preachers of being deficient in learning and coming from "the meanest professions and the lowest occupations of life".⁴ In his reply, Benson indicated that there were four qualifications which a preacher should have: he should be "supernaturally enlightened"⁵, have a "birth from above"⁶, "a conduct according to the gospel"⁷, and "the presence and blessing of the Lord Jesus".⁸ Commenting on Tatham's

¹A Sermon Preached on the Sunday Evening Preceding the Opening of Conference, July 26, 1791. Birmingham, J. Thompson, 1791.

²Socinianism Unscriptural... Birmingham, E. Jones, 1791.

³A Defence of the Methodists, in Five Letters, Addressed to the Rev. Dr. Tatham. London, G. Paramore, 1793.

⁴Ibid., p.30.

⁵Ibid., p.12.

⁶Ibid., p.14.

⁷Ibid., p.17.

⁸Ibid., p.20.

accusations that Methodist preachers were ignorant, Benson points out that Tatham's indictment not only reveals his impiety, but that his treatment of a subject with which he was not acquainted reveals his ignorance as well.

Although Tatham made no reply, a young clergyman in the person of W. Russel, Curate of Pershore, sent a reply entitled "A Few Hints for the Consideration of Methodists and Other Dissenters". According to Richard Treffry, Russel's pamphlet was "destitute of all argument" and "exhibited such gross violations of the plainest rules of the English language, as scarcely to deserve a serious answer".¹ Certainly the young vicar approached his task in the wrong manner by threatening to "beat" Benson with "an instrument which.....would make a.....sensible impression of its weight and power".² Benson replied to Russel in five letters³, the first of which reveals his caustic humour. Addressing Russel, he says that he had hoped to make him appear respectable because a conquest of such a person would elevate his own position while a defeat would not appear so bad, therefore "it is quite unplesing to see you debasing yourself in this manner, in the very second page of your work".⁴ In the other four letters Benson tries to prove that Methodism has not separated from the Church and that ordination

¹Treffry, pp.159-60.

²Ibid., p.160.

³A Further Defence of the Methodists; in Five Letters Addressed to the Rev. W. Russel. London, G. Paramore, 1794.

⁴Ibid., p.8.

comes from the Holy Spirit and not the laying on of hands. No more was heard from Russel in the matter, but Jeremiah Brettell wrote in his memoirs that in later years Russel publicly declared "that he would go twenty miles to hear Mr. Benson, if he knew where he was to preach".¹

In 1796 Benson published a third apology, this time in defence of the Methodist Discipline², which was followed by a fourth vindicating the Methodist Conference.³ The replies which he received to these publications reveal his respectful treatment of opponents and also the reputation which he had acquired as a polemical writer. Replying to the former, the writers remark, "Let it be observed here, we think ourselves much obliged to Mr. Benson for the candid and liberal manner in which he has treated our characters".⁴ Concerning the latter work, an opponent writes, "Mr. Benson is the ablest polemical writer, perhaps, in the Methodist Connexion".⁵

¹"Memoirs of the Rev. J. Brettell", The Methodist Magazine, 1830, Vol. 53, p. 725.

²The Discipline of the Methodists Defended, in a Letter to Messrs. Smith, Longridge, etc. in Answer to their Late Address to the Methodist Societies. London, 1796.

³A Defence of the Conduct of the Conference in the Expulsion of Alexander Kilham. Addressed to the Methodist Societies. 1796.

⁴"Reply to Messrs. Mather and Pawson's Address". (Anonymous). Newcastle, 1796, p. 5.

⁵Thomas Shaw, A Letter to Mr. Benson. 1797, p. 1. W.W. Stamp, Methodist Magazine, 1845, Vol. 68, p. 425, says that Mr. Shaw "certainly missed his proper path, when he came out to draw quills with Mr. Benson".

After having served in Bristol, Leeds and Hull between 1794-99, he was made superintendent of the London circuit in which capacity he served until the Conference of 1803. During his London itinerancy, seven of his works were published, three of which were sermons¹, one a biography², while three were apologies for Methodism.³ During this period he was actively engaged in forming a plan to safeguard Methodism against the old charges of dissent and unpatriotism which had been rekindled by the war with France. Many reports were being circulated that the 1689 Act of Toleration should be more rigidly enforced and that new laws should be introduced against dissenting groups. Upon Benson's suggestion, the 1803 Conference formed a Committee of Privileges⁴, whose function was to advise Methodists when law suits were directed against them arising from their worship services and also to discourage the passing of government measures that were unfavourable to the Connexion. The members of this first committee were all influential lay Methodists with the exception of Dr. Coke, who held a law degree, and Joseph Benson.

¹A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Methodist Chapel, in Twickenham, near London, Dec. 14, 1800.

The Substance of a Sermon, Preached at the New Chapel. London, G. Story, 1801.

Sermon on P. Dickenson, May 30, 1802.

²Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. P. Dickenson. London, G. Story, 1803.

³A Vindication of the People Called Methodists.... London, G. Story, 1800.

An Apology for the People Called Methodists.... London, G. Whitfield, 1801.

The Inspector of Methodism Inspected, and the Christian Observer Observed.... London, G. Story, 1803.

⁴Minutes of Conference, II, pp. 185-86.

Benson had been so successful during his superintendency in London that the London Quarterly Meeting addressed a letter to the ensuing Conference requesting that an exception be made to the stationing regulations so that Benson could return to London a fourth year. In explanation they declared that "he has peculiar influence in raising all our different branches of finance to a state never equalled before" and that it is "the general wish of the people".¹ Conference did return him to London but not as an itinerant; he was instead appointed editor of the Methodist Magazine.² He held this position until his death in 1821, and was so successful that by 1811 he had doubled the circulation of the magazine.³

While serving as editor of this most important Methodist publication, Benson continued to preach in the London chapels and also became a favourite personality for opening new Methodist chapels.⁴ But despite his busy life, he found time to publish and edit many works. In 1805 he published a biography of John Fletcher⁵ and the following year edited a hymn book for children⁶ which had

¹Macdonald, pp.388-89.

²Benson was the fifth editor of this magazine after John Wesley, T. Olivers, J. Creighton, and G. Story. While he was editor the magazine changed its name from the Arminian Magazine to the Methodist Magazine.

³G.J. Stevenson, City Road Chapel. London, 54 Paternoster Row, (no date given).

⁴Among a few of the chapels opened by him were: Hull, Bilstone, Bubswith, Sheffield, Portsea, Salisbury, Tunbridge Wells, Gravesend, Wednesbury and Woolwich.

⁵The Life of the Rev. John W. De La Flechere.... London, John Mason, 1838. The first edition was in 1805.

⁶Hymns for Children and Young Persons.... London, R. Lomas, 1806. This remained the standard hymn book for Methodist youth until 1825

a second edition in 1814. In 1806 Conference appointed him, along with the president and secretary of Conference, "to draw up a Digest or Form, expressive of the Methodist Doctrines"¹, which appeared in 1807.² Two years later he began editing the works of John Wesley in seventeen volumes, which he completed in 1813.³

In 1809, upon the request of Conference, Benson began writing his opus magnum, his Commentary on the Scriptures. The first volume appeared in 1810 and the last in 1818. Although the commentary was not in vogue outside of Methodism, it became a standard work within the body.⁴ Conference offered him five hundred pounds "as a mark of approbation; but no entreaty could prevail on him to accept any part of the money".⁵

Besides being actively engaged in writing his commentary, he found time to help raise funds for the new Woodhouse Grove Methodist

¹Minutes of Conference, II, pp.349-50.

²Articles of Religion Proposed to the Consideration of the Preachers of the late Rev. John Wesley's Connection. London, G. Story, 1807.

³Richard Green, The Works of John and Charles Wesley. A Bibliography. 2nd edition, London, Methodist Publishing House, 1906. Benson also published the Works of Fletcher in 9 volumes and the Christian Library in 11 volumes.

⁴See Minutes of Conference, III, p.298; Ibid., IV, p.123; Ibid., IV, p.232 and p.447. Also Methodist Magazine, 1851, Vol.74, p.179. Also C. H. Spurgeon, Commenting and Commentaries. London, Passmore and Alabaster, 1876, p.35, who says of it: "Adopted by the Wesleyan Conference as a standard work....necessary to Methodist Students".

⁵G. J. Stevenson, Methodist Worthies. Characteristic Sketches of Methodist Preachers of the Several Denominations, with Historical Sketch of each Connexion. London, T. C. Jack, 1886, Vol.1, pp.186-87.

school and in 1811 was chosen as one of the trustees.¹ Nor did he abandon his ministerial functions, for Macdonald says that on January 2, 1814, he read prayers at 11.00, preached until 1.00, held a covenant meeting from 2.30 until 4.00, gave the Sacrament to five hundred communicants until 6.00, preached again at 7.00 and concluded his services at 8.30.² And despite his activities as writer, scholar, editor, trustee, and preacher, he undertook in 1816 a new monthly publication which he called The Youth's Instructor and Guardian.³

He remained active up to the time of his death; in fact, "nearly the whole of the articles for the Magazine for February, 1821, the month in which he died, were selected and prepared for the Press by Benson".⁴ His death which occurred on February 16, 1821, was a great loss to the Connexion. And it is significant that the Conference of 1821 allow more space for an account of his life in the obituary section of the Minutes than any other preacher has ever received, but in addition Conference set a precedent by treating his death at some length in its annual address to the Methodist Societies. This was a mark of approbation which was not given to any of his

¹Wm. Myles, Chronological History of the People Called Methodists... London, Conference Office, 1813, p.353.

²Macdonald, p.459.

³Minutes of Conference, IV, p.232. This magazine continued until 1846.

⁴MS. of George John Smith on Leeds Methodism, p.57. Located in the Book Room in London.

contemporaries, to any preacher during the middle period of Methodism, or even to John Wesley himself.¹

With a sketch of Benson's life and achievements before the reader, attention may be drawn to one feature of his thought relating to the issue which precipitated the Bristol Dispute, that is, the administration of the Sacrament by lay preachers.

Three different contemporary sources contend that it was Benson who first influenced Wesley to ordain his preachers.² One of these declares:

It was very probable, that through the influence of Mr. Benson, Ordination was first introduced into the connection. He earnestly intreated Mr. Fletcher to write Mr. Wesley to get him to ordain preachers, and introduce the ordinances. Mr. Fletcher did so; and soon after Mr. Wesley ordained some of the preachers, and authorised them to baptize and administer the Lord's Supper.³

A copy of this letter to Mr. Fletcher is extant.⁴ However, after Wesley's death Benson changed his view regarding the necessity of

¹After Benson's death seven volumes of his works, in addition to two biographies on him, were issued.

Letters, Chiefly Doctrinal. London, T. Blanshard, 1823.

Sermons and Plans of Sermons. London, Cadell, 1826-27, Vols. I, II, and III.

Sermons on Various Occasions. London, John Mason, 1836, Vols. I, II.

A Methodist Courtship, Love Letters of Joseph Benson and Sarah Thompson, 1779-1780 (Edited by M. Jemison). Atlanta, Emory University Press, 1945.

²"An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society in Leeds.....". Leeds, T. Hannam, 1794, p.31.

"An Humble Address to the Methodist Society in General.....". Bristol, E. Edwards, 1794, p.8.

John Murlin, "Circular to Brother Benson". Wycombe, Dec.23, 1794.

³"An Affectionate Address", p.31.

⁴W. L. Watkinson Collection, II:175.

ordination for administration. At the 1791 Conference he proposed:

that imposition of hands were merely a circumstance, suitable and significant, but not essential to ordination; the act of admission into the ministry, so as to be devoted wholly to it, and to exercise the pastoral charge, being the true scriptural ordination, both to preach the word, and to administer the Sacraments.¹

The years following the 1791 Conference were characterised by mounting tension between those who desired and those who resisted lay administration. When it became clear to Benson that the majority of Methodists wished to receive the elements from their own lay preachers, he came to the conclusion:

It must be done. For our people being brought to God by our ministry and finding that their own preachers can administer that blessed ordinance to them, will demand it of us, in preference to their receiving it at the hands of a minister, of whom they cannot approve. It must be administered to them, where the people claim it, or the work of God will be destroyed in many places, by our withholding it from them.²

¹George Smith, History of Wesleyan Methodism. London, Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1863, Vol.2, pp.101-102.

²Benjamin Rhodes, "The Point Stated.....". Birmingham, J. Blecher, 1795, pp.20-21.

CHAPTER TWO

The Secondary Sources Presented and Examined

Apart from the valuable work of George Smith¹, no historian has attempted a comprehensive treatment of the Bristol Dispute. Although the subject is discussed in subsequent Methodist literature, most historians have referred to Smith for the bulk of their evidence and therefore have made little contribution to the subject. Consequently, a detailed presentation of Smith's account of the Dispute will be given while the other secondary sources will only be listed and categorised.

For convenience, the secondary sources may be divided into three main groups. The first group, consisting of the more general works on the history of Methodism, includes the works of Abel Steven², W. H. Daniels³, and the recent volumes of W. J. Townsend, H. B.

¹George Smith, History of Wesleyan Methodism. London, Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1863, Vol.II.

²Abel Steven, The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century, Called Methodism: Considered in its Different Denominational Forms and its Relations to British and American Protestantism. From the Death of Wesley to the Centenary Jubilee of Methodism. London, William Tegg, (No date), pp.33-39.

Abel Steven, The Illustrated History of Methodism: Being an Account of the Wesleys, Their Contemporaries and Their Times, and the Origin and Progress of Methodism. London, James Hagger, ?, II, pp.246-276.

³W. H. Daniels, A Short History of the People Called Methodists, From the Days of the Wesleys to the Methodist Oecumenical Conference Held at City Road Chapel, London, in September, 1881. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1882, pp.390-94.

Workman and George Bayrs.¹ These scholars have as their concern the whole sweep of the Methodist movement. Their cursory discussions of the dispute mark no advance on the information found in Smith.²

More important for the understanding of the subject has been the second group of works more limited in scope which deal with sections in Methodist history, within which the period of the Bristol Dispute falls. This includes the writings of Frank Baker³, J. S. Simon⁴, Maldwyn Edwards⁵, and the anonymous writer of an article in the London Quarterly Review entitled: "The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795".⁶ The work of these scholars provides the high lights of the Controversy and a skeleton of the important events.

But most important for the present investigator has been the third group of sources treating specialised subjects indirectly

¹W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, George Bayrs, A New History of Methodism in Two Volumes. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1909. See Vol. I, the chapter entitled "Wesleyan Methodism - the Middle Period: 1791-1849", pp. 384-86 by J. Robinson Gregory.

²A. Steven's works appear to antedate that of Smith.

³Frank Baker, (MS.) "Relations Between Methodism and the Anglican Church: 1791-1800", pp. 13-15.

⁴J. S. Simon, The London Quarterly Review, October, 1884, pp. 21ff.

⁵Maldwyn Edwards, "The Years of Unrest: 1790-1800", The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, I: October, 1941, pp. 451-58 and II: January, 1942, pp. 84-93.

⁶"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", London Quarterly Review, LXIII, 1885, pp. 1-24.

concerned with the dispute. The works of R. Burroughs¹, Charles E. L. Gardner², J. R. Gregory³, Norman W. Mumford⁴, Benson E. Perkins⁵, A. W. Harrison⁶, and Mrs. Richard Smith⁷, though only incidentally concerned with the dispute, do open up new approaches to its context. The list included in this group like that of the other two groups by no means exhausts the scholars who refer to this subject, but the above writers have certainly proved to be the most helpful to the present writer. There is no necessity to state the conclusions reached by these historians since they agree by and large with Smith. However, occasional references will be made to their works in this chapter in so far as they offer additional evidence on the part Joseph Benson played in the controversy.

¹R. Burroughs, Ebenezer, 1795-1895, A Centenary History of Old King Street Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol. Bristol, W. C. Hemmons, 1895.

²Charles E. L. Gardner, (MS.) A Short History of Portland Street Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol, and its Surrounding with Brief Notices of some of the Principal Persons, and Events, Connected with Methodism in this City, pp.26ff.

³J. R. Gregory, "Notes From an Old Methodist Journal", Winter Number of the Methodist Recorder, 1901, pp.67-71.

⁴Norman W. Mumford, "The Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the Methodist Church after the Death of John Wesley", The London Quarterly and Holborn Review, January, 1951, pp.61-70.

⁵Benson E. Perkins, Methodist Preaching Houses and the Law. The Story of the Model Deed. London, The Epworth Press, 1952, pp.55-60.

⁶A. W. Harrison, "The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England", The Wesley Historical Society Lectures, No.11. London, The Epworth Press, 1945, pp.41-57.

⁷Mrs. Richard Smith, The Life of the Rev. Mr. Henry Moore. London, Simpkin, Marshal and Co., 1844, pp.124ff.

Smith's treatment of the Dispute falls into three logical divisions: the background, the Dispute, and the reconciliation. In presenting the background, he very ably describes the factors which led to the crisis in Bristol.¹ Explaining the strong Methodist attachment to Anglicanism which continued after the death of John Wesley, Smith suggests that conditions, such as immoral clergymen, repulsion of Methodists from the Lord's Table in parish churches, and above all Wesley's ordination of Methodist preachers for administration of the elements in Methodist chapels, demanded that the observance of the Sacrament be generally conceded to all Methodist chapels. Following Wesley's death this demand took the form of an organised movement on behalf of lay preacher administration which in turn gave rise to an organised opposition. Circulars were published throughout the Connexion advocating or denouncing this innovation. The decision of the 1791 Conference to follow "strictly the plan which Mr. Wesley left us at his death" allowed a wide range of interpretation, and it was construed by each party to its own advantage. The ensuing Conference of 1792 prohibited the Sacrament for the coming year in those chapels where it was not an established custom. This increased the tension, for it encouraged the High Churchmen to hope for a continuing prohibition.

Turning to the local Bristol scene in 1792, Smith records

¹This is found in his chapter "Origin and Progress of the Controversy Respecting the Administration of the Sacrament by Methodist Preachers and its Issue", II, pp.5-25.

how two Methodist preachers, Bradburn and Roberts, conducted the opening service of the new Portland Chapel, wearing gowns, bands and surplices which offended the trustees of the Old Room as well as the local vicar, both of whom openly denounced the action. However, Bradburn who replied in his own defence, received the support of the majority of the Bristol Methodists.

Returning to the general Connexional situation, the historian states that the demands for administration in Methodist chapels had its effect upon the Conference of 1793 which resolved to grant the Sacrament to those societies that were unanimously for it. This greatly alarmed the advocates of "the Old Plan" who considered this decision a drastic defeat of their cause. However the force of events could not long be checked, and the Conference of 1794 made a further concession by granting the Sacrament where "union and concord" could not be preserved without it. Therefore it was in the light of this decision that the trustees of the Old Room resolved to resist these developments at the first opportunity.

Having established the background, Smith next focuses his attention on the events of the Dispute itself.¹ He says that the Room trustees found their pretence for action when Henry Moore, following the conclusion of the 1794 Conference, assisted with the Eucharist at Portland Chapel. Accordingly, on August 11th, they sent Moore a legal notice forbidding him to preach in their chapels.

¹See G. Smith, II, pp.25-29 and pp.105-121.

The historian comments:

It was a happy circumstance for the Connexion that this aggression was made on one so able to repel it as Henry Moore. But it was a very serious case. If the trustees of Bristol could thus, without any trial, inquiry, or even charge, expel from their pulpits a minister whom the Conference had appointed, the trustees of other places might do the same; and then the chapels being held in the absolute power of a few men in each place,¹ the working of Methodism would become impossible.

On the day following his notice, Moore attended the regular Leaders' Meeting at which he inquired whether anyone had an accusation to make against his character or conduct. After a long silence one of the trustees said that the trustees of the Old Room had a legal right to appoint preachers for their chapels, and that they simply had not chosen to appoint him. Moore replied by pointing out that this action tended to overthrow Methodism and must be considered as an informal separation of the trustees from the Connexion.

Moore first considered retiring from the circuit, but he was persuaded to remain as the champion of the people's cause against the oppression of a few trustees who were endeavouring to rule the circuit. Therefore in the course of his duty he went to the Old Room to preach; upon learning that the trustees intended to obstruct his path to the pulpit, he read aloud the legal notice and announced that he would adjourn to preach in Portland Chapel. When he left the Room, the majority of the congregation followed, and together

¹Ibid., p. 26.

they proceeded up the hill to Portland Chapel.

On August 18th, Moore sent a circular to the Methodist Connexion in which he explained the manner in which the dispute arose. In the circular, he mentioned a piece of ground located near the Old Room which "we have gotten by a remarkable providence", and, he added, "we trust to have a chapel soon erected".¹ The letter was endorsed by nine trustees and stewards, forty-four class leaders, and Thomas Coke, Samuel Bradburn, Thomas Rutherford, and Richard Elliot.

Twelve days later on August 30th, the Old Room trustees issued a circular in reply to that of Moore's accusing Moore and Bradburn of having disturbed the peace of the society "by erecting Portland Chapel for service in church hours, and the administration of the sacraments".² They endeavoured to justify their legal notice to Moore on the grounds of the provisions in their Deed of Trust, and the trustees maintained that they had no desire to usurp the power of Conference. In conclusion they pointed out that Moore himself had defied Conference in his efforts to encourage the Bristol people to agitate for the Sacrament.

Following the advertising of the Bristol events, the Connexion became alarmed and the people formed their opinions "according to their respective party feelings".³ The adherents of the "Old Plan", who wished to prohibit administration of the elements by the lay

¹Ibid., pp.107-108.

²Ibid., p.109.

³Ibid., p.27.

preachers, sided with the trustees, while those advocating the innovation supported Henry Moore and his cause. Smith says that Benson, the superintendent of Bristol, upon his arrival on the scene, united with the trustees against his expelled colleague and made matters worse. But, says the historian, the situation in Bristol can "be regarded as representing the general state of opinion and feeling throughout the Connexion"¹, for in Bristol, as elsewhere, the majority of the people were determined to secure first the right of Conference to station preachers and second the privilege of the sacraments from the hands of their own preacher.

On September 9th, the trustees issued another letter which was replied to by Moore on September 13th. Both of these publications had their impact upon the whole body of Methodism, and a growing rift in the Connexion became increasingly apparent. The situation in the Bristol circuit was degenerating even more rapidly where an actual split gave rise to virtually two distinct circuits. Three of the four preachers appointed to Bristol, Joseph Benson, Richard Rodda, and Thomas Vasey rallied under Benson's leadership and preached in those chapels under the control of the Old Room trustees, while Thomas Coke, Jonathan Crowther, and Richard Elliot came from outside the circuit to support Henry Moore in ministering to the other Bristol chapels.

When it was clear that Benson would not alter his stand, Moore

¹Ibid., p.120.

made an appeal to Samuel Bradburn, the Bristol District chairman, who summoned a District Meeting. At this meeting a denunciation of all trustees who refuse preachers appointed by Conference was first proposed. However, this proposal was resisted by Moore himself on the grounds that the trustees of Portland would be equally condemned along with those of the Old Room, and was rejected.¹ Following this Joseph Benson submitted terms of reconciliation: first, the Old Room trustees should revoke their legal notice on the condition that Moore cease administering the Sacrament at Portland Chapel; second, all trustees should agree to receive all preachers appointed by Conference unless for reasons of false doctrine or immorality; third, Portland Chapel should forbear the Sacrament, except by a clergyman, until the Society was unanimously for it from the hands of a lay preacher; and finally, the building of the opposition chapel should immediately cease. But these proposals could not be accepted by Moore and his associates without acknowledging a defeat of their cause. Likewise the suggestion of William Thompson, the first president of Conference who unofficially attended the District Meeting, that Portland be added to another circuit allowing an unopposed freedom of the Sacrament in that chapel, was rejected. The meeting concluded by sanctioning the conduct of Moore and denouncing that of Benson, Rodda and Vasey

¹Ibid., p.112. On p.111 Smith comments on certain indefinite charges alluded to in his own summary of the trustees' letter published on September 9th against Moore. By way of explanation, Smith says that "...they 'i.e. Moore's party) had shut Benson, Rodda and Vasey out of Portland chapel...". There is no statement at all, on the part of the historian, as to the precise nature and occasion of this action.

as one of virtually seceding from the Connexion. The historian states that this final action of the District Meeting indicates that the meeting considered the main object of contention to be a contest between the authority of Conference and the power of trustees.¹

The gravity of the situation became even more acute after the failure of the District Meeting to restore peace, and a proposal was circulated for an extra Conference sitting. However, this proposal was successfully rejected by the important circular of Thomas Hanby and John Pawson. No solution appeared at hand. Circulars were published from all parts of the Connexion expressing one view or another.²

Meanwhile the bitterness in Bristol continued to mount and spill over into the entire Connexion, thus changing the situation from one of widespread agitation to a Connexional crisis with the impending threat of a schism. The Methodist trustees organised under the leadership of the Manchester trustees, whose circular was responded to by no less than fifty-four different bodies of trustees, while the vast majority of the people and preachers looked to Henry

¹Ibid., p.114.

²Smith states that he will mention only a few of the most important circulars and pamphlets: namely, the two letters to the Cornwall Methodists by R. Williams, the Address of Alexander Mather, another Cornwall circular, the Manchester and Stockport circular, the Liverpool circular, the Leeds' reply to the Manchester circular, John Murlin's letter, the Launceston circular, a letter from "A Member of the Conference", and the published resolutions of the Aberdeen District. In each case the stand adopted by the publication is stated.

Moore as their leader and champion. Despite the confusion and precariousness of the situation, the inevitable result of the struggle was not doubtful. For not only did the Connexion, in general, rally around Moore and succeed in threatening the position of the organised trustees, but the new chapel in Bristol, which superseded the Old Room, placed the Bristol trustees in a position dangerous to their survival. Therefore, Smith maintains, the possibility of reconciling the opposing parties in Bristol was established. At this point the historian directs his attention to the period of reconciliation.¹

The first meeting designed to reconcile matters was held in February, 1795, at Kingswood and was attended by Benson, Moore and Bradburn. At this meeting all three parties agreed upon the embryo of a plan which was advanced a step further when the same persons met again on April 1st.

On April 5th, Thomas Coke met with Henry Moore and Joseph Benson, and additional progress was made with this plan of settlement. While the plan was still in its early stages, the Conference of 1795 assembled and selected nine preachers: Joseph Bradford, John Pawson, Alexander Mather, Thomas Coke, William Thompson, Samuel Bradburn, Joseph Benson, Henry Moore and Adam Clarke to draw up and present a plan of reconciliation. With the exception of a single article Conference approved their proposals. After the submission

¹Ibid., pp. 29-31 and pp. 121-124.

of these proposals to the body of trustees gathered at Conference and the addition of a few of their suggestions, a scheme for settling the issues at contention, known as "the Plan of Pacification", was adopted. This "Plan" confirmed the authority of Conference to station preachers and at the same time settled the issue of the sacraments in allowing them to be administered in those chapels where the majority of the trustees, stewards, and class leaders were in favour of them.

An evaluation of Smith's account obliges one to credit him with a notable piece of scholarship. Especially is this true when it is realised that it comes within the body of a three volume work that embraces the whole scope of Methodist history up to the end of 1843. Quite naturally, this wide range of interest imposed a limitation on him; indeed, he did not intend to provide an exhaustive study, a monograph, on the Bristol Dispute. Since his object was to consider the whole of Methodist history, he necessarily evaluated and sifted the information at hand in an attempt to relate the fundamental events and issues involved. Thus problems do emerge which the historian may not have noticed or else deemed inappropriate for his purpose. In the following pages, Smith's account will be examined with the intention of citing some of the problems that appear. Following this, the evidence he presents on Joseph Benson will be pin-pointed and examined with the help of other secondary sources.

Smith establishes the background of the dispute by properly

drawing attention to the underlying tension resulting from the unsatisfactory sacramental conditions in Methodism. The Connexion is seen to have been divided into two camps: one advocating itinerant¹ administration of the Lord's Supper, while the other, the supporters of the "Old Plan", opposed the innovation because of its threat to the Anglican relation. But Smith's correlation of the "Old Plan" with the policy of the Church party is a misrepresentation of a fact that is not at all incidental to the development of the tension and the final eruption in Bristol. If Wesley was the leader of the Methodist movement, if the Deed of Declaration was its legal charter, then the "Old Plan" was its unwritten constitution. The "Old Plan" was a Methodist tradition and a watchword, and it was as relevant to early Methodism as "precedent" has been to the British law courts. In reality, the "Old Plan" was a recognised scheme for the fulfillment of the Methodist mission, and all development and innovations were evaluated from its vantage point. Consequently both contending parties during the period leading to the eruption endeavoured to prove to the Connexion that their claims were authorised by this Plan.

Smith's failure to note the import of the "Old Plan" leads him to over-simplify the background of the dispute, because the evidence reveals that each side's appeal to this Plan gave rise to two issues: one regarding the Sacrament and the Church relation and the other

¹Compendium for administration of the Lord's Supper by itinerant lay preachers.

respecting Conference authority. Although Smith treats both issues, he deals with the latter as though it accidentally arose; he makes no attempt to show its relation to the former issue.

Just as Smith over-simplifies the Connexional context underlying the dispute, he also tends to overlook factors involved in the local Bristol scene. He merely contends that the Room trustees were determined to check the sacramental innovation and found their pretence for action when Henry Moore assisted with the Sacrament at Portland Chapel. This position is questionable when it is realised that these trustees declared to the 1794 Conference that they had no objection to Moore administering in any of the chapels located in the Bristol circuit, but that if he administered at Portland Chapel, they would expel him from their pulpit. This fact is not noted by Smith, and it is sufficient to indicate that the motive of the trustees had implications other than a resistance to the sacramental innovation. Likewise, in this connection, it is not insignificant that Henry Moore, an old figure in Bristol Methodism, and who is treated by Smith as merely the coincidental butt of the trustees' aggression, seems to have been personally involved in the situation.

Regarding the period of reconciliation, Smith's presentation is so brief that few questions arise. There are, however, two observations which may be made. In the first place the historian declares that the opposition chapel "virtually superseded the old Chapel in Broadmead"¹ and so threatened the position of the Old Room

¹Smith, II, p.121.

trustees that Benson "put himself in communication with Moore for the purpose of devising a plan of agreement". This first meeting took place in February, 1795.¹ However, it appears unlikely that a chapel which was not opened until June 28, 1795,² could have "virtually superseded" the chapel of the Room trustees and provoked a meeting for reconciliation four months earlier.

A second observation regards the development of a plan of agreement between the contending parties. Here Smith neither mentions the points of agreement nor attempts to correlate them with the final plan adopted by the Conference of 1795. Obviously he had avoided a detailed discussion of this, and therefore the need for further investigation is apparent.

Pin-pointing and analysing Smith's evaluation of Joseph Benson's stand in the Bristol Dispute, the problems become much more acute. Although little attention is given to Benson, Smith refers to him in three important passages. In the first instance he maintains that Benson was:

known to hold views respecting the sacramental question very similar to those entertained by the trustees; (his) support was accordingly counted on in the struggle; and the presumption was well founded; for, on the expulsion of Moore from the Old Room, we do not hear of any protest from Benson, as the superintendent, against this arbitrary conduct of the trustees;

¹Ibid., p.29.

²Memorial Bulletin of the last service of Ebenezer Chapel on 11th April, 1954, p.7. See also, E. B. Parkins, Methodist Preaching Houses, p.57.

nor did he and the other preachers object to preach in these chapels until Moore was also allowed to do so. Some measure of this might have been expected, and might have put down the schism.¹

In the second instance, Smith declares that Benson, who was a distinguished member of what was called the High Church party, united himself with the trustees who had expelled his colleague from their pulpit.²

And in the final instance, regarding the district meeting which had been summoned to judge the situation, Smith says:

Yet Mr. Benson, and his other two colleagues, not only voted against this (i.e. the meeting's sanction of Moore and denunciation of the Room trustees), but actually set the authority of the District Meeting at defiance; and persisted in preaching in the pulpits from which their legitimately appointed colleague was excluded.³

Before examining Smith's position, other secondary sources should be referred to. Some of these sources completely ignore Benson's role⁴; others simply allude to it and assume Smith's stand⁵, while others refer to Benson and imply a view similar to that of Smith.⁶

¹G. Smith, II, p.105.

²Ibid., pp.27-28.

³Ibid., p.28.

⁴Townsend, Workman and Eayrs, pp.284-86.

M. Edwards, "The Years of Unrest: 1790-1800".

N. W. Mumford, "The Administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the Methodist Church After the Death of John Wesley".

⁵C. Gardner, MS. "History of Portland Chapel".

⁶J. R. Gregory, "Notes from an Old Methodist Journal".

Such scholars as Abel Steven¹, Mrs. Richard Smith², W. H. Daniels³, R. Burroughs⁴, and A. W. Harrison⁵ all reflect the view that Benson sided with the Room trustees on the basis of his High Church convictions; however, the first two scholars declare this with certain reservations. Steven writes:

Benson, Rodda and Vasey, were inclined by their conservative opinions to compromise with the trustees, or at least to submit to them and leave the determination of the question to the Conference.⁶

Mrs. Smith maintains, in a similar fashion, that:

Mr. Benson.....being on the high church side, resolved to abide by the trustees in what they had done, leaving the final issue to the determination of Conference.⁷

There remains but one more source, and this source is unique in that it makes no mention of Benson's "High Church opinions" colouring his stand. The anonymous writer of this article says:

¹A. Steven, The Illustrated History of Methodism, II, p.273. See also his work, The History of the Religious Movement.....Called Methodism, p.36.

²Mrs. R. Smith, The Life of.....Henry Moore, p.130.

³W. H. Daniels, A Short History of the People Called Methodists, p.393.

⁴R. Burroughs, Ebenezer, p.34.

⁵A. W. Harrison, "The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England", p.51.

⁶Steven, The Illustrated History of Methodism, II, p.273.

⁷Mrs. R. Smith, p.130.

After some thought he (i.e. Benson) decided that as the Conference had appointed him to preach in those rooms, it would be better for him to do so irrespective of what had occurred. The Bristol Society very soon showed him its estimate of his conduct. He was excluded from Portland Chapel, and out of fifteen hundred members thirteen hundred joined Mr. Moore.¹

It would appear from this source that Benson did not take sides with the Room trustees, but rather preached in their chapels because Conference had appointed him to do so.

Turning to Benson's biographers for additional light, it is understandable that while Macdonald² declares it, Treffry³ reveals his reluctance to discuss the dispute, for not only were Macdonald and Treffry, both of whom wrote for religious edification not historical scholarship, writing at a time when offence might have been caused⁴, but, according to a MS. Minute Book of the 1822 Conference:

Mr. Bunting said Mr. Benson wished those papers not to be made use of which referred to controversy with individuals as they might excite some unpleasant feeling.⁵

Now that the secondary evidence on Benson has been presented, the reader may see that, with the exception of the writer of

¹"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p.21.

²Macdonald, p.271.

³Treffry, pp.184-195.

⁴Macdonald wrote in 1822 and Treffry in 1840 during which time Henry Moore was still alive.

⁵This MS. copy of the minutes of the 1822 Conference is located in the archives of the Methodist Book Room in London.

"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", all scholars have maintained a position similar to that of George Smith. Thus, since Benson has been placed in the disconcerting role of a "High Churchman" who, as a result, sanctioned the Room trustees in their "schism" and in their "defiance of Conference", and who finally "actually set the authority of the District Meeting at defiance", it is little wonder that history has viewed his function in the controversy with suspicion. However, let us briefly examine these three views of Benson.

In the first place, it has been assumed that Benson's decision to side with the old trustees¹ was rooted in his loyalty to the High Church party. Generally speaking, this party may be defined as that group of Methodists who advocated a strict Anglican union and opposed any measure which threatened this union.² But essentially, "Methodist High-Churchism", as seen from the crisis of the time, was an opposition to the administration of the sacraments by lay preachers. This is precisely what Smith means when he maintains that Benson was "known to hold views respecting the sacramental question very similar to those entertained by the

¹The Room was the first Methodist chapel; its trustees are often designated as the "old trustees".

²Macdonald, p.238 and also the circular from John Murlin "To Brother Benson", Wycombe, Dec. 23rd, 1794, both declare that Benson used Anglican prayers in his services. Macdonald, p.161; S. Bradburn's letter to R. Rodds quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.10, p.133; B. Rhodes, "The Point Stated", Birmingham, J. Blecher, p.20 - all three describe how Benson preached during Church service hours. Both of these practices were abominable to the Church party.

trustees".¹ However, this is questionable when it is considered in the light of the previous chapter on Benson, for Benson administered Baptism himself as early as 1783², proposed, according to Smith himself, at the 1791 Conference that admission into the ministry qualified a preacher to administer³, and introduced lay administration into the Bradford circuit.⁴ But the most obvious objection can be seen in the fact that Benson personally requested permission from the 1794 Conference to administer the Lord's Supper in Bristol.⁵

In the second place it has been maintained that Benson gave his sanction to trustees who had formed a "schism" against Conference authority. But it appears doubtful that Benson, who was chosen by Conference to address the assembly of preachers in 1794 and in 1795 and who, on both occasions, chose the evil of schism as his topic, should have become involved between these two Conferences in a schism which resulted from a defiance of Conference. A further objection to this view is indicated by the anonymous writer of "The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1794" when he states that Benson decided to preach in the Room trustees' chapels because

¹G. Smith, II, p.105.

²See Wesley's Letters, Vol.7, pp.178-9.

³G. Smith, II, pp.101-102.

⁴"To the Methodist Connection at Large", Bradford, July 8th, 1795.

⁵"An Humble Address to the Methodist Society in General; and to Trustees, Leaders and Stewards in Particular" (signed Aquila and Priscilla). Bristol, E. Edwards, 1794, p.7. See also A. Mather's Circular of October 27th, 1794.

Conference appointed him to do so. Thus it would appear that Benson was only fulfilling his appointment.

Additional evidence relating to Benson's stand which is provided by Smith, though he fails to consider its moment, regards the opposition chapel erected by Moore and his associates. According to Smith, the decision as well as the beginning of work on this chapel antedated Benson's arrival in Bristol. Since the chapel could not have had the authorisation of a district meeting, and its erection was therefore a violation of Conference rules, it appears likely that Benson may have had difficulty in deciding which party in Bristol was the greater aggressor against Conference authority.

But the most serious objection to the view that Benson sided with a group of trustees who had defied Conference is found in the expulsion of Benson from Portland Chapel by Moore and his associates. Smith parenthetically refers to this incident¹ without attempting an explanation. It will be sufficient here simply to point out two implications which have been ignored. In the first place, having been erected in 1791-92², Portland Chapel was bound to have been settled on the Conference Plan.³ Consequently, Benson's

¹G. Smith, II, p.111, says "As, for instance, they had shut Benson.....out of Portland chapel, although bound to receive whomsoever the Conference should appoint.....".

²Ibid., p.21.

³See Perkins, Methodist Preaching Houses, p.50.

expulsion appears to have been contrary to the deed of Portland Chapel, whereas the Room trustees, in expelling Moore, at least were authorised by their deed of trust.¹ In the second place, it so happens that Benson's expulsion is identical in principle to that of Moore. Therefore this not only raises a problem regarding Smith's interpretation of Benson's stand, but it even seems to question the historian's major premise that Moore and his associates were the champions of Conference's right to station preachers.

Turning to Smith's final description of Benson as acting in defiance of the District Meeting and being denounced by the Meeting as having "virtually seceded from the Connexion by sanctioning thetrustees"², there are many factors unexplained. The regulations of the time called for a district meeting to examine the expulsion of a preacher from a chapel. But though Moore is seen to have been given such a trial, Smith does not mention whether Benson received similar treatment. Surely at the meeting held for Moore's benefit, which sanctioned Moore and denounced Benson, the latter would have pleaded his own case, but there is no hint of this. One wonders about the composition of this meeting which must have been vividly aware of the implications behind the opposition chapel as well as the repulsion of Benson. Yet Smith concludes that the meeting was endeavouring to preserve "Conference authority" against the encroachments of trustees who had expelled a preacher appointed

¹G. Smith, p.104.

²Ibid., p.114.

by Conference. Certainly some explanation is required here.

Now that the secondary sources on the Dispute in general and on Joseph Benson in particular have been presented and evaluated, the need for a reconsideration of this subject will be apparent to the reader. But before turning to this reconsideration, it should be indicated that the subject will be treated from a fresh start. In other words, the thesis will neither be interrupted with references to problems found in the secondary sources nor be based upon assumptions drawn from them. Instead, primary material will be used and only in the case of necessity will the later sources enter in.

¹Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

The Problem of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism

The problem behind the Bristol Dispute was rooted in unsatisfactory conditions for Anglican Communion which caused early Methodists to agitate for administration of the Lord's Supper from their own lay preachers. Since this conflicted with the Methodist-Anglican relation and with Wesley's view of "administration", Wesley attempted measures which would preserve the Church relation, sustain his view of "administration", and satisfy the demands of his followers. But his provisions did not solve the problem; they only deferred a solution until a crisis arose necessitating a definite settlement.

Although Methodism arose out of a prophetic inspiration to reform the state of religion in England and the National Church, perhaps no other religious movement gave more attention to the ordinances and priestly functions of the Church. Of all the ordinances, the Lord's Supper received the greatest Methodist emphasis. Indeed, Leslie Church says that Methodists were "trained to regard Holy Communion as 'the central act of worship'".¹ For John Wesley, the Lord's Supper was not merely central, it was a direct command of Christ that could not be ignored. He concludes his sermon on "The Duty of Constant Communion" by declaring:

¹Leslie F. Church, More About the Early Methodist People. London, The Epworth Press, 1949, p.213.

It has been shown, First, that if we consider the Lord's Supper as a command of Christ, no man can have any pretence to Christian piety, who does not receive it (not once a month, but) as often as he can. Secondly, that if we consider the institution of it, as a mercy to ourselves, no man who does not receive it as often as he can has any pretence to Christian prudence. Thirdly, that none of the objections usually made, can be any excuse for that man who does not, at every opportunity, obey this command and accept this mercy.¹

If Wesley charged his followers to attend the Sacrament, it was explicit that it should be received at the Established Church. At his first conference in 1744, he replied to the question, "Do we separate from the Church?" with the words:

We conceive not. We hold communion therewith, for conscience' sake, by constantly attending both the word preached, and the sacraments administered therein.²

And in the rules for the United Societies, as elsewhere, the reception of the Sacrament was always connected with the Church.³ Although in later years Wesley was constrained to modify this view, he never abandoned his hope for Methodists communicating at Church. As late as 1786 he says in a letter to Henry Brooke:

In 1743, the Rules of our Society were published; one of which was, 'to attend the

¹"The Duty of Constant Communion", The Works of the Rev. John Wesley. London, Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room, VII, p.156.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p.9.

³Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies", Works, VIII, p.271.

Church and Sacrament'. This all our members (except Dissenters) were required to do, or they could not remain with us.¹

If Wesley's purpose was to save souls and reform national religion, then his message was "repent, believe and flee from the wrath to come". His hearers, motley groups of people scattered up and down the length of Britain, had in common a "spiritual unrest and a hunger which craved satisfaction".² They heard Wesley with the urgent realisation that the answer to their salvation was confronting them, and they accepted zealously the charge to receive the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the reception of this Sacrament, according to Wesley, was evidence that they had not abandoned the real desire for salvation.³ Leslie Church says,

The people did not resent him urging their 'constant communion'. To them it was no formal ceremonial act. They came gladly and were filled with profound joy as they received the Sacrament.⁴

Despite the wholehearted reception of "constant communion" by the Methodist people, factors were at work which tended to make Anglican Communion inevitably unsatisfactory. These unsatisfactory conditions led to circumstances in the Bristol and London centres that differed, however, from the situation in the provinces.

¹Wesley's Letters, VII, p.332.

²Leslie F. Church, The Early Methodist People. London, the Epworth Press, 1948, p.33.

³Wesley's Works, VIII, p.271.

⁴Church, More About the Early Methodist People, p.255.

In Bristol as early as 1740 Charles Wesley and a group of Methodist colliers were repelled from the Lord's Table by a local clergyman. This led to Charles administering the elements himself to Bristol Methodists outside of a parish church. John Bowmer comments:

The Methodists at Bristol were thus no longer welcome at the Lord's Table of their parish church, and the practice began of holding their own communion services.¹

Also London Methodists were fortunate to have an early access to the Eucharist in their own chapels, for John Wesley spent much of his time in London and was able to officiate in consecrated Methodist chapels there. The precise date of this practice is uncertain, but certainly the Sacrament was a part of the London Methodist services by the end of 1745.²

On the other hand, provincial Methodism did not have Methodist clergymen available and the problem became more serious. There the unsatisfactory sacramental condition sprang from two sources: objections to Church Communion and the growing independence of the Methodist movement.

One of the objections to Church Communion came from Methodists situated remotely from a parish church. To these rural people it was inconvenient and a nuisance to walk many miles to a parish

¹John Bowmer, The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism. London, Dacre Press, 1951, p.63.

²Ibid., p.68.

service when all of the other aspects of their religious needs were met by a local Methodist community in a nearby Methodist chapel. The inconvenience appeared illogical, especially to Methodist converts who had no Church ties, and it was perplexing to these people to be obliged to attend the "supreme form of worship" at a strange place and among strange people.

Yet other conditions related to the Anglican clergy did more to discourage Church communion. At first clergymen had responded to Methodism with curiosity or indifference; later these attitudes were replaced by suspicion. Adam Clarke says that the clergy "even hated our professing ourselves to be members of the Church of England".¹ Sermons were preached against Methodists², and in some cases the clergy sponsored persecutions.³ This atmosphere was not at all congenial to Methodist attendance of the Lord's Supper in the parish churches; clerical indifference and suspicion, not to mention persecution, were bound to drive Methodists away not only from the Lord's Table but from the Establishment as well.

In connection with this bad rapport between Methodists and clergymen, there were direct affronts made by clergymen who repelled Methodists from the Lord's Table because of their Methodist affiliation. Occasionally the character of the incumbent was sufficient to turn Methodists away on their own accord. Of course,

¹Adam Clarke's letter to H. Sandwith, June 16th, 1829. Quoted in Church, More About the Early Methodist People, p.263.

²Church, Op. cit., p.61.

³Ibid., pp.57-98.

there were many pious clergymen who were friendly to Methodists, but even here a problem often arose. Leslie Church gives a striking illustration of an evangelical clergyman who won the affection of the local Methodists and they suspended their own worship services. Soon after this had been done, the priest was removed on account of his irregular activities leaving the Methodists under the wing of a new unsympathetic vicar.¹ Such cases would discourage Methodists from placing too much hope in the Establishment even when the local vicar was sympathetic and evangelically-minded.

Therefore with these barriers to Anglican Communion, the problem tended to increase. Unfortunately many faced the dilemma of either relinquishing the Sacrament or else abandoning their Methodist calling. This dilemma was most acute, for John Bowmer says,

A people less firmly attached to the ordinances of the Church might have continued without the Sacrament, very much as the Salvation Army or Quakers do today. The Methodists, however, were not so trained. Agitation is always distressing, but in early Methodism agitation was the symptom of a firm allegiance to the ordinances of the Church.²

However the situation was not so simple as the dilemma would make it appear, for there was the growing independence of Methodism which, in itself, produced a claim for an independent use of the Sacrament. The vast majority of Methodists' religious needs obtained satisfaction in the Methodist society environment, and the necessity of receiving the Sacrament from an outside source appeared

¹Ibid., p. 260.

²Bowmer, p. 69.

unreasonable. Moreover, Methodists, conscious of a contrast of their lives with that of their non-Methodist neighbours, became increasingly convinced on this basis alone that the Lord's Supper should be administered in their own worship centres. The influence of the Bible played no small part, and Methodists interpreted Christ's command as justifying their claim.

Although many Methodists continued to frequent the services of the Establishment, the majority could not be expected to consider their own worship service as merely supplementary to "what was, unfortunately, sometimes a formal and perfunctory service in the parish church"¹; and consequently, says Leslie Church, "it became obvious that provision must be made.....for the sacrament of Holy Communion".² In making these claims for the Sacrament, Methodists did not disavow their ties with the Church of England. Instead they viewed this as no more a breach than was the accepted preaching service. In reality, the Methodist-Anglican relation was incidental to Methodists; salvation and holy living, of which the sacramental claim was an aspect, were first and foremost.

Perhaps the best explanation of the Methodist people's view of the Church and the Sacrament can be derived from John Wesley's sermon: "Of the Church". In the context of a discussion on the Church

¹Church, More About the Early Methodist People, p.214.

²Ibid., p.213.

universal, Wesley says,

Two or three Christians united together are
a Church in the narrowest sense of the word.
.....They are one body, and have one Spirit,
one Lord.....one God and Father of all.¹

Then he defines the visible Church of Christ as "a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered".² Methodists considered their services to be exactly this: a collection of faithful Christians where the "Pure word of God is preached". The only element lacking was "and the sacraments be duly administered". No wonder they determined to press for this until it was granted.

Despite the increasing desire for the Sacrament, there is no evidence, with the exception of Norwich³, suggesting that Eucharistic services were held in provincial chapels prior to 1780. After this date Wesley himself tended to administer the elements in some of the larger towns and at the opening of new chapels⁴, but his willingness to officiate could not solve the problem; it only delayed its final solution.

¹Wesley's Works, VI, p. 396.

²Ibid.

³According to Bowmer, pp. 73-74, Wesley was accustomed to administer the Lord's Supper during his Norwich visits. Bowmer says that at least five lay preachers administered at different times to the Norwich society. Wesley, "The Ministerial Office", Works, VII, pp. 277-78, refers to one preacher who had officiated there, but he says that the guilty preacher "promised to do it no more".

⁴Bowmer, p. 75.

There were two restraining elements which hindered a solution to the problem. The first was the influence of the Church-loyal Methodists who were usually located in the larger Methodist centres and in general where parish churches were numerous and convenient. In 1774, "nearly all the Methodists in Macclesfield.....were members and communicants of the Church of England"¹, while in 1781 there were "about eleven hundred" Leeds Methodists who communicated at the Church.² Likewise, the Manchester Methodists as late as 1800 were in the habit of attending the Lord's Supper at St. James's Church after their own services ended.³ A conflict between the Church-Methodists and the liberal Methodists at Manchester resulted in a division in the Society with the latter group deciding to erect its own chapel.⁴ Feelings ran high between the two groups throughout the Connexion with the Churchmen resolved against the innovation of lay preacher administration. Regarding this attitude of the Church-Methodists, Bowmer says,

Thus, in some of the larger towns at least, the original connexion with the Church of England was maintained, and no Communion services were held in the Methodist chapels. This is confirmed by the case of two Methodists in Truro who objected to receiving the Sacrament from an unworthy clergyman. As an alternative they went, not to their own chapel, but 'were allowed by a decisive majority to partake at the Congregational Chapel'.⁵

¹The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley (Edited by Nehemiah Curnock). London, Robert Culley, 1909, VI, p.14.

²Wesley's Journal, VI, p.329.

³Ibid., p.411.

⁴Bowmer, p.72.

⁵Ibid., p.73.

The most significant restraining factor was John Wesley himself. Wesley's own motive for opposing itinerant administration in Methodist chapels was derived from his conception of the Methodist mission and his theological view of administration. For Wesley, Methodism was to act as a leavening process for an Anglican revival¹; for this reason it had to remain an integral part of the Church of England.² Believing that lay-preacher administration would cause a breach with the Church, he opposed it.

In addition, his opposition to lay administration was based upon his theological view of administration. John Bowmer's conclusion that "It was a fixed principle in Wesley's life that there could be no administration without ordination"³ is certainly confirmed by the evidence. Of his itinerant preachers, Wesley says, "We received them wholly and solely to preach, not to administer sacraments".⁴ He was careful to distinguish the office of an "evangelist" from that of a "priest" declaring that the former preached while the latter administered the sacraments.⁵ Accordingly, he permitted his lay itinerants to preach and conduct other services, but he forbade them to officiate at the sacraments. When they

¹Minutes of Conference, I, p.9.

²Wesley's Works, VII, p.278.

³Bowmer, p.149.

⁴Wesley's Works, VII, p.277.

⁵Ibid., p.275.



acted in this capacity, as in the case of Norwich, he made them promise to cease or else leave his Connexion. Although Wesley believed that he, as an episcopally-ordained minister, had the authority to ordain and thus to convey the right to administer, during the greater part of his life he felt no necessity to bring this conception into practice. In a letter dated September 3, 1756, to Nicholas Norton he declares:

Yet I do not tolerate lay administration, because I do not conceive there is any necessity for it, seeing it does not appear that, if this is¹ not at all, one soul would perish for want of it.

But despite the restraining influence of Wesley and the Church-Methodists, a situation was steadily developing which excluded any solution that did not concur with the wishes of the bulk of Methodists. The people, says Adam Clarke, were growing "very weary of not having the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper administered in our own Chapels, by our preachers".² And despite Wesley's assertion that the character of a minister need not effect the blessing of the Sacrament he administers³, the problem was not eased. Methodists felt that the characters of their own preachers, in contrast to clergymen, warranted their administering; beyond this they believed it their right to receive the elements from the same men who were the

¹Wesley's Letters, III, p.186.

²Adam Clarke's letter, quoted in Church, Op. cit., p.261.

³"On Attending the Church Service", Wesley's Works, VII, pp.174-185.

instruments of their conversions.¹ They witnessed how their preachers were called of God, appointed and set apart from secular pursuits by Wesley in order to preach², and it was reasonable that the next logical step should be ordination.

Wesley, who became increasingly aware of the mounting tension behind the problem, began to realise that Church Communion could not satisfy the sacramental needs of Methodists. Consequently, he began to make provisions which might ease the situation. His first definite measure was in 1763 when he requested the ordination of Dr. John Jones from a travelling Greek bishop, Erasmus.³ Although the bishop complied, Charles Wesley refused to recognise the ordination, causing Dr. Jones to leave the Connexion and frustrating Wesley's first attempted solution.⁴

Having failed to obtain the credentials for his preachers from an outside source, Wesley was obliged to revert to his own right to ordain.⁵ Earlier he had refrained from using this prerogative hoping that he would not be forced to deviate from the discipline of the Church of England, but with the gravity of the situation, particularly in America, he felt it was necessary. Accordingly,

¹Adam Clarke's letter, quoted in Church, Op. cit.

²Minutes of Conference, I, pp.77-79.

³G. Smith, I, p.297. Erasmus was Bishop of Arcadia in Crete.

⁴Ibid., p.299.

⁵Minutes of Conference, I, p.180.

after Bishop Lowth refused his request to ordain Methodists for America¹, Wesley, in September, 1784, ordained three preachers and sent them to America.² Having taken the initial steps, it was an easier decision when in 1786 he ordained three more preachers for service in Scotland.³ Here, as in the case of America, Wesley admitted a variation from the discipline of the Church of England⁴, but he denied that it was an act of separation, since the Establishment "is not concerned in the steps which are taken in Scotland".⁵

These ordinations did not alleviate the problem in England, though they did prepare the way for a solution there. The strong ties of English Methodism with the Establishment made the logical sequence of English ordinations fraught with obstacles in the mind of Wesley. Though he did condescend to ordain three itinerants for England in 1789⁶, he imposed restrictions which permitted them to administer only where he should see fit to appoint them.⁷

Prior to his death in 1791, Wesley had recognised, in full, the extent of the sacramental problem and had sought a solution that would not drive a permanent wedge between Methodism and Anglicanism.

¹Wesley's Letters, VII, pp.29-31.

²Wesley's Journal, VII, pp.15-17.

³Ibid., p.101.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p.189.

⁵Ibid., p.191.

⁶Wesley's Journal, VII, pp.421-22; pp.471-73.

⁷Wesley's Letters, VIII, p.279.

At his death the problem was not settled but certainly the inevitable fact of administration by Methodist preachers was clear. It would be a misrepresentation for the historian to project his own vantage point upon the contemporary Methodist who was too uncomfortably close to the situation to believe that the settlement was a few simple steps ahead. If to some the solution appeared both clear and near, it yet appeared on the opposite bank of a raging river, for there was the powerful opposition of the Church-Methodists to contend with. Thus Wesley's death was like the breaking of a dam freeing the old problems and creating new ones, whose sheer force in merging threatened to divide the unity of the Connexion. The sacramental problem soon grew into an issue, and its solution had to come within the context of other issues which succeeded in complicating, even obscuring, but nevertheless hastening the solution.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Old Plan of Methodism

John Wesley's death in 1791 left Methodism in a state of perplexity and confusion, depriving the Connexion of its leader, its final judge of appeal, and its guide to the fulfillment of its mission. Wesley had been the centripetal personality behind unity, and his death threatened this unity. The leading men of Methodism, like Octavius, who realising the magic charm of the name "Caesar" exploited it in founding the Roman Empire upon the old Republic, were aware of the name and power of the personality of Wesley, and they determined to use it in preserving Methodism as it entered the second phase of its development. Certainly there was no other human authority to which they could appeal. And so the first Conference of 1791 unanimously resolved to "follow strictly the plan which Mr. Wesley left us at his death".¹ The conservatism and ambiguity of this decision permitted a favourable interpretation by all diverse elements in Methodism allowing Conference the opportunity to establish its claim of leadership. Also the decision gave Conference time to feel the pulse of Methodist opinion and deliberate upon future plans.

But if the decision to follow Wesley's plan was ambiguous, it was nevertheless a commitment to a policy with quite definite

¹Minutes of Conference, I, p. 246.

interpretations. During the first fifty years of the Methodist movement this plan, commonly known as the "Old Plan of Methodism", had arisen and had become an inherent part of the general Methodist education. Wesley had constantly referred to it; his preachers were continually alluding to it in their sermons, and in general it was reverently used as the guide to all major Methodist decisions. In the final analysis, while Wesley was alive, the "Old Plan" was generally understood in the manner Wesley interpreted it. Thus, in a sense, the "Old Plan" was Methodism's unwritten constitution, while Wesley was the supreme court of its interpretation.

According to Wesley, the "Old Plan" was a method, i.e. of following the openings of "providence" along lines consistent with scripture and reason for the purpose of reviving national religion, particularly in the Establishment, and saving individual souls. During the passing of the years, various means to this end, such as a continued Church union, the autocratic position of Wesley, the itinerant system, and the ordinances of the Church, came to be incorporated as features of the "Old Plan". Most of these features were accepted without question, but with the measures taken by Wesley that deviated from the Church discipline and the inclusion of dissenters among the ranks of Methodists, the preservation of a Church union became questionable to many Methodists. However, Wesley himself never abandoned his affection and hope for the Establishment. If at all possible, he intended to preserve the regulations and traditions of the Church. But in doing this, he

never lost sight of his ultimate mission, as seen in his words to the Bishop of London: "Church or no Church, we must attend to the work of saving souls".¹

Wesley was the symbol as well as the guide to the "Old Plan" for his followers, yet they had an independent attachment to it which naturally persisted after the death of their leader. Generally speaking, they understood this "Plan" to embody a continuing Methodist development along the same old Wesleyan lines. They believed that Wesley had no "fixed plan" regarding the manner of worship², that his plan was a "plan of salvation"³ "to hear and embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ"⁴, to "promote the kingdom of

¹Henry Bett, The Spirit of Methodism. London, Epworth Press, 1937, p.79.

²"Remarks on Several Passages in the Works of the Late Rev. John Wesley: Being a Brief Description of What is Called 'The Old Plan'; and of Mr. Wesley's Sentiments Concerning a Christian Church. Addressed to the People Called Methodists". (By a Friend to that Religious Body). Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794, p.2.

John Pawson, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies. To Which are Added, Extracts of Various Letters, Written by the Late Rev. Mr. Wesley, upon the Subject Now in Debate Among Them. With Remarks upon a Late Publication from Manchester". Liverpool, January 20th, 1795, p.25.

³"An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society, In Leeds, and Elsewhere; Respecting the Late Transactions at Bristol. To Which is Added, a Postscript, Entitled 'Observations of a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church'". (By Onesimus). Leeds, Thomas Hannam, 1794 (Dec.6), p.35.

⁴Gustavus Didley, "An Answer to a Letter, Signed London and Bristol Trustees; Addressed to the Trustees and Others in the Methodist Connection with the Late Rev. J. Wesley", Aug.3rd, 1793.

Christ, in the use of the best means in our power"¹, and that its "grand end was the salvation of Souls".² It meant a development along the lines directed by "Providence"³, and was designed as a benefit to "every denomination, not regarding Sects or Parties".⁴ It did "not depend upon our union with the Church;.....nor upon our separation from it; but upon the power and presence of God with us".⁵ Yet deviation from the Establishment was to be avoided unless "irresistible necessity induced" it.⁶ One early Methodist gives the following summary of his conception of the "Old Plan":

First, as to its doctrines, a display of God's universal love to man by Christ. Secondly, It therefore called upon all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel, that they might

¹Benjamin Rhodes, "The Point Stated, and Impartially Considered Which is at Present Debated Among the Methodists, at Bristol and Elsewhere. Also an Explanation of the Old Plan of Methodism, and a Short Plan of Reconciliation, Proposed, by Way of Exhortation". Birmingham, J. Belcher, 1795, pp.21-22.

²John Pawson, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies...", p.25.

³Benjamin Rhodes, "The Point Stated, and Impartially Considered ...", pp.21-22.

Onesimus, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society, in Leeds...", p.35.

John Pawson, "An Affectionate Address...", p.25.

⁴Didley, Op. cit.

⁵Thomas Hanby, John Pawson, Adam Clarke, and Andrew Mayor, "To the Preachers Late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley". (1794?).

⁶"An Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies Throughout England from the Conference Assembled at Leeds, Aug.6, 1793". Minutes of Conference, I, p.278.

enjoy the full benefits of that love. Thirdly, it enforced the necessity of all who professed it, giving full evidence of this in their lives and conversations.¹

Therefore, the Methodist people, like their leader, conceived of the "Old Plan" as a mission for the saving of souls, and they also considered the instruments to this end to be inherent in the "Plan". Among such instruments were the Church ordinances, particularly the Lord's Supper. The great tension behind unsatisfactory sacramental conditions producing the Methodist claim for an independent use of the Lord's Supper has already been discussed. Here it is sufficient to indicate that most Methodists believed that the "Old Plan" authorised this claim, and so they looked to Conference as Wesley's successor to provide them with the means to this privilege.

Soon after Wesley's death, Conference became fully aware that the people desired the Sacrament from their own preachers, but circumstances did not justify a hasty decision. Conference had first to establish its own authority and secure the unity of the Connexion. In doing this, Conference cautiously resolved to follow the "Old Plan". But it was precisely this resolution which rendered an immediate decision on the Sacrament difficult.

The difficulty of a decision allowing itinerant administration

¹Alexander Mather, an addenda to a circular from the Trustees of Manchester and Salford also the local Preachers and Leaders of those Societies entitled "To the Members of the Methodist Connection". Manchester, Oct. 14th, 1796.

lay in the "Old Plan's" commitment to Church union. It was natural that the Church Methodists should call attention to this and denounce itinerant administration as a direct breach with the Establishment. This group of Church Methodists, composed of laymen and preachers, had a powerful voice which exceeded their numerical strength. However, they derived their greatest strength from chapel trustees who were generally of a wealthier class. Since these men held respectable positions in society and not infrequently in local government, they had a special motive for a Church attachment. Toward the end of Wesley's life they became increasingly alarmed over the growing rift away from the Church and therefore after his death, they were the first to express their fear of a schism from the Church. Their published circulars took the form of declarations, but essentially they were meant as a warning against lay administration and a breach with the Church.

Their first publication, issued from Hull on May 4th, 1791, declares:

We are well convinced the usefulness of the Methodists has been, and will be, greatly increased by their continuance in connection with the Church of England.We can not consent to have the sacraments administered amongst us by the Methodist Preachers.....¹

These sentiments were repeated in the Bristol², Birmingham³, and

¹The Hull Circular, May 4, 1791.

²The Bristol Circular, May 11, 1791.

³The Birmingham Circular, June 21, 1791.

Sheffield¹ circulars. Although the above publications reflected the viewpoint of chapel trustees, some of the preachers shared their sentiments.² In the main the Churchmen were successful in focussing Connexional attention upon the threat that itinerant administration offered to the "Old Plan" and its design for a continuing union with the Church. With the issue seen from this perspective, a Conference settlement of the old sacramental problem was difficult, but for those who led the movement for lay administration, known as the Sacramentarians³, it was embarrassing.

The Sacramentarians were fully aware of their disadvantage. And so they endeavoured to shift attention to another feature of the "Old Plan" by pleading that the plan was chiefly concerned with the itinerant system⁴ and the following of "providence" in compliance "with the wishes of the people".⁵ They denied that it had any "allusion.....to the Sacraments"⁶ or the "Church"⁷ and maintained

¹The Sheffield Circular, June 27, 1791.

²William Thompson's letter to Joseph Benson dated June 28, 1791, quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.6, p.5.

³J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794, p.11.

⁴Samuel Bradburn, "The Question Are the Methodists Dissenters? Fairly Examined. Designed to Remove Prejudice, Prevent Bigotry and Promote Brotherly Love". Bristol, Lancaster and Edwards, 1793, p.23.

⁵John Pawson, "An Affectionate Address", p.7.

⁶Bradburn, Op. cit., p.22.

⁷Ibid., p.21.

that "those therefore who attempt to make it such are endeavouring to subvert the Old Plan".¹ They proclaimed their policy to be one of "extension" not "innovation", since "the term innovation must mean.....that something is attempted to be introduced which is contrary to the 'Old Plan'", which, according to the Sacramentarians, had nothing to do with worship "but only the doctrines taught".² But despite their efforts the Churchmen continued to press the accusation that itinerant administration was a denial of the "Old Plan's" design for Church union, and the Sacramentarians were constrained to face this charge. Consequently, they tried to mitigate the impact of their claims by avoiding a reference to the ordinances other than the Lord's Supper and by disclaiming a Church separation.

But while the Sacramentarians denied separation, they nevertheless continued to make cautious proposals for the introduction of the Sacrament. One example of this is found in a pamphlet of Jonathan Crowther, who though expressing a hope for a continuing Church union, writes:

But I do believe, that in some, perhaps in many places, we shall have the Lord's Supper

¹Ibid.

²"Remarks on Several Passages in the Works of the Late Rev. John Wesley: Being a Brief Description of What is Called 'The Old Plan'; and of Mr. Wesley's Sentiments Concerning a Christian Church. Address to the People Called Methodists". By a Friend to that Religious Body. Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794, p.3.

.....for the accommodation of those who can not in conscience attend the Church.....¹

Another pamphleteer writes:

all the Methodists never did go to the established church to receive the Lord's Supper; there have been exempt cases from the beginning.

.....it is impossible to bring all the Methodists to an exact uniformity..... in order to receive the Lord's Supper.²

Alexander Kilham reveals how acutely the Sacramentarians regarded the accusation of Church separation. After claiming that Methodists deserved the privilege of the Sacrament, he adds:

If any will call the above a separation they may; we do not, as we are still willing to attend the services of the Established Church, yea, and to join in the sacraments too, in those places where the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments are duly administered.³

Though the Sacramentarians proclaimed a loyalty to the Anglican Church, it was to the ideal Anglican Church, for they did not refrain from sanctioning a detachment from the existing one. A clear example of this is found in the following:

¹Jonathan Crowther, "The Crisis of Methodism: or Thoughts on Church-Methodists, and Dissenting-Methodists; including Strictures on Mr. Knox's 'Considerations' and 'Candid Animadversions'. To which are added. Some Remarks on the Address of the Trustees of Manchester, etc.". Bristol, R. Edwards, 1795, p.15.

²Onesimus, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society in Leeds.....", p.18.

³Alexander Kilham, "Answer to the Hull Circular". Newcastle, 1791. Quoted in "The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", London Quarterly Review, Vol. 63, p.9.

The Methodists do not desire to separate from such a Church, wherever they find it; but wish in the fullest sense of the word to be a part of that Church of England constituted of faithful men; having the pure word of God preached to them, and the Sacraments duly administered. But where can they find such a Church: Is there such a one established in this kingdom?¹

And while they disavowed separation, they carefully called attention to the evils of the Establishment.

This is all the separation we contend for. In those places where the ministers neither preach nor live the gospel, who can wonder if pious people should scruple to join them in the sacred ordinance of the Lord's Supper.²

Indicating that the Church had failed in its obligation to Methodism, they turned to, what they described as, the only other recourse - that of Methodist itinerant administration of the Sacrament.

In support of this the Sacramentarians appealed to moral, logical and legal arguments. Pointing to the apathetic and mundane outlook of the clergy, they maintained that Methodists were morally obliged to partake of the sacred Ordinance from itinerants whose characters qualified them for this function. Furthermore, it appeared only logical that "Ought not, therefore, those ministers who have begotten them in the gospel, to feed these souls.....?"³

¹"Remarks on Several Passages in.....Wesley: Being a..... Description of.....'The Old Plan'.....", p.8.

²Kilham, "Answer to the Hull Circular". Quoted in "The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p.8.

³Ibid.

Their legal arguments were based on John Wesley.

Mr. Wesley designed the Lord's Supper to be administered by the ordained Preachers, or why did he at their ordination, ask them, 'Will you then give your faithful diligence, always to minister the doctrines and SACRAMENTS in the congregation?' You may say, 'This was for Scotland or America', I say, It was no such thing. The reverend Messrs. Mather, Moore, &c. were not ordained for either Scotland or America, any more than I was.¹

The first attempt by the Sacramentarians to establish a means to itinerant administration was through ordination. According to John Pawson, Wesley intended that his ordained preachers should "ordain others".² This did not appear inconsistent with the "Old Plan" to them, for Charles Atmore, who after taking part in an ordination ceremony in Newcastle, says:

I confess I acted contrary to my judgment, though I did not conceive that it was opposed to the plan which Mr. Wesley left us at his death.....³

And since Wesley's right to authorise was unquestioned, the Sacramentarians insisted that the delegation of Wesley's powers to Conference included this right.

Therefore, the people who desire it, having the Lord's Supper from the Preachers whom Conference may authorise to administer it, is no breach of the plan left by Mr. Wesley, nor the smallest infringement of the engagement of Conference.⁴

¹Bradburn, p.22.

²John Pawson's letter to Charles Atmore, Dec.13, 1793. Quoted in J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Atmore", The Methodist Magazine, 1845, Vol.68, p.315.

³Charles Atmore's Memoirs, Quoted in Ibid., p.215.

⁴Bradburn, pp.22-23.

But ordination was only a *modus operandi*, an instrument to gain the end of itinerant administration. So long as it appeared to be a means, the Sacramentarians were prepared to use it. Yet if they had been unaware of the dangers which the word "ordain" suggested to the High Churchmen, certain published letters made this clear to them.¹

Although the 1792 Conference did not altogether reject the proposal for ordination, it did resolve that, "No ordination shall take place in the Methodist Connexion, without the consent of the Conference first obtained".² However, the matter was brought to a close when the 1793 Conference decided to erase the distinction between ordained and unordained preachers.³ This made little difference to the Sacramentarians, who were probably instrumental in this decision, for at this sitting, Conference took its first definite stand regarding the use of the Sacrament by resolving:

That the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall not be administered by the Preachers in any part of our Connexion, except where the whole Society is unanimous for it, and will not be contented without it; and in even those few exempt Societies, it shall be administered as far as practicable, in the evening only, and according to the form of the Church of England.⁴

¹"To the Members of the Methodist Conference, City-Road, London". Leeds, July 12, 1792.

²"A Review of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Reasons Why the Methodists in Connexion with him Should not Become Dissenters, or Form Themselves in a separate Sect". Bristol, July, 1792.

³Minutes of Conference, I, p. 259.

⁴Ibid., p. 278.

⁵Ibid., p. 279. Charles Atmore's Journal, J.S. Stamp, Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 22, indicates that eighty-six preachers voted for this while thirty-eight voted against it.

Conference explained this as a "diviation"¹ from the Church, not a separation, which had been necessitated by the demands of the Methodist people.

A dilemma.....has been experienced by us since the death of Mr. Wesley. A few of our Societies have repeatedly importuned us to grant them the liberty of receiving the Lord's Supper from their own Preachers. But, desirous of adhering most strictly to the plan which Mr. Wesley laid down, we again and again denied their request. The subject, however, is now come to its crisis. We find that we have no alternative, but to comply with their requisition, or entirely to lose them.²

Regarding the Church and the "Old Plan" Conference declares:

But we entreat our Societies at large to continue, as usual, in connexion with the Church of England; and we shall, with great cheerfulness and contentment, labour among them according to that simple original plan of Methodism, established and left to us by our venerable friend.³

Conference did not ignore the wishes of the Churchmen in making its concession to the Sacramentarians, for it declared its reluctance to take this measure, based its decision upon a necessity arising from the people's demand, and worded its resolution negatively. Beyond this, Conference's rejection of ordination and its prohibition of the use of gowns, cassocks, surplices and the title "Reverend" were meant to be concessions to the Churchmen, toning down the impact of the sacramental resolution and rendering

¹Minutes of Conference, I, p.278.

²Ibid., p.279.

³Ibid., p.280.

it, if not more acceptable, at least less objectionable, to the Churchmen.

Until the 1793 Conference the status quo of Methodism had been maintained, and the Churchmen had remained relatively quiet. But the sacramental concession of 1793, regardless of these sweetening ingredients, was a bitter pill to the Churchmen who interpreted it as an act of abandoning the "Old Plan" and, more so, as an ominous sign for the future of Methodism. They were confident that the introduction of the Lord's Supper would act as a keystone for joining the other ordinances and eventually causing a complete separation from the Establishment. Therefore, they prepared themselves to check this development.

If the Sacramentarians based their policy on the logic of John Wesley, then the Churchmen based their objections on his words. With little difficulty they were able to cite passage after passage from Wesley proving to their satisfaction that the "Old Plan" excluded the sacramental innovation, which, if initiated, would reduce Methodism to "a form or dry system"¹ and undermine the original design of the movement.² Certain leaders, stewards and trustees of the Leeds society declare:

¹"Primitive Methodism Defended". Bristol, W. Pine and Son, 1795, p.5.

²"Address of the Trustees of Manchester, Salford, and Stockport, to the Methodist Societies at Bristol, and Elsewhere". Manchester, Oct.21, 1794, p.2.

We.....have long seen with concern the steps some of our Preachers have been taking to introduce that Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.....which, if some measures are not used to prevent, must in the end prove entirely subversive of the Original Plan of Methodism, by making us a body of people separate from the Church of England, in connection with whom we wish to live and die.¹

In a similar tone the Bristol trustees write:

.....it was the Divine Will we should be Auxiliaries to, and not Separatists from, the Established Church. - Consequently, we can not permit.....the Lord's Supper to be administered among us by our own Preachers.....²

Perhaps the most complete explanation of the Churchmen's view on the situation is that given by one who appears to have no party affiliations. This writer says:

1. They urge that if the Lord's Supper be generally administered by the Methodist Preachers it will alter the whole plan of the Methodists, be a general departure from their original design, which was, to leave the establishment and every other party uninterrupted, that the effect of administering the Sacrament amongst us, will be to draw off a very large body of people from their Connection with the Church of England, which, at this period, would be highly injudicious.
2. That whatever arguments are now formed against the corruptions of the establishment, or other communities, were equally forcible in the rise of Methodism.
3. That the primitive Methodists, Preachers, and People, understood the Bible, loved it, and had consciences full as tender as ours.....yet, they did not think themselves obliged to communicate with them alone.

¹Letter from the Leaders, Stewards and Trustees of the Leeds Society to Joseph Benson, Richard Rodda and Thomas Vasey. Quoted in "Address of the Trustees of Manchester, Salford, and Stockport", p.23.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", p.4.

4.thousands.....triumphed over death, hence they conclude a departure from these principles cannot be essential to salvation.¹

The objection of the trustees was of little avail, for this concession, despite the restrictions imposed on it, was more than a first round victory for the Sacramentarians. It meant that Conference had, practically speaking, interpreted itinerant administration as consistent with the "Old Plan". Not only could the innovation now easily be extended, but since Conference had pledged its allegiance to the Church in the context of its decision, the way was prepared for the shifting of the old focus away from the Church to another feature of the "Old Plan".

The anticipation of a shift of focal points first revealed itself when certain London and Bristol trustees, due to the sacramental concession, addressed a letter to the 1793 Conference accusing it "of a departure from the 'original plan'".² Conference retorted by affirming its loyalty and by charging the two sets of trustees with personal ambition.³ This indictment against the trustees in conjunction with Conference's new interpretation of the "Old Plan" not only opened the way for a new shift of concern regarding the old sacramental issue, but it called attention to what that concern would be. That is, if trustees continued to challenge Conference's decision on the Sacrament, this in itself

¹"A Conciliatory Essay, Addressed to the Methodists in General". Sunderland, T. Reed, 1795, pp.15-16.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p.280.

³Ibid., p.281.

exposed the trustees to a similar charge of denying the "Old Plan". Then the centre of Connexional interest instead of being on the Church relation would be on Conference authority; instead of the slogan "Churchmen vs. Sacramentarians", it would be "Trustees vs. Conference". The die was cast and a new issue was in the making, an issue which became more apparent when trustees, on a more general scale, met in London prior to the 1794 Conference to form an organised resistance to the innovation.

Although the sacramental innovation was the real basis of contention, as it had formerly provoked an issue on the Methodist-Anglican relation, the organised resistance to it among trustees was now creating such alarm among many preachers that a new issue regarding trustee power and Conference authority was arising. Therefore, when the long period of tension and polemics broke into the bitter contention in Bristol, the Connexion felt that:

There are two things which those who wish to divide us are now contending about.....: First, What degree of power the Trustees ought to be invested with? Second, Whether we ought to separate from the Established Church.¹

¹Pawson, "An Affectionate Address", p.3.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bristol, the Centre of the Flare-up

Although the Church party throughout the Connexion was alarmed over the threat which administration by Methodist lay preachers would have to the existing Church relation, there were many factors that tended to select Bristol as the centre of tension. Bristol Methodists were the first to receive the Sacrament regularly in their own chapels; this practice began as early as 1743.¹ Therefore the sacramental problem and the resulting resentment for the Church that was characteristic of provincial Methodists did not develop in Bristol. Instead, the attachment to the Church remained largely unimpeded and traditionally respected, allowing Bristol to become a centre for staunch Church Methodists.

Until 1792 the Room and Guinea Street Chapels were the only two chapels located in Bristol, and their seven trustees were particularly noted for their outspoken loyalty to the Church. Henry Durbin, their leader, reflects his sentiments in a letter to Charles Wesley in 1784. So angry was Durbin over John Wesley ordaining preachers for America that he refers to him as a "Presbyterian".² Following Wesley's death and the absence of his

¹John Bowmer, p.65.

²This letter is quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.2, p.103.

restraining influence on the Connexion, these trustees were apprehensive over the possibility of the sacramental innovation and endeavoured to resist it with all their resources. One of the trustees was a printer by trade¹, which gave them a ready access to the press. Their first circular, warning the Connexion against lay administration, appeared on May 11th, two months after Wesley's death²; this was followed by another publication on July 20th that was addressed to the 1791 Conference.³ Since their fears were alleviated by this Conference resolving to abide by Wesley's "plan", nothing appears to have been published by them during this Conference year. However, when the 1792 Conference met in July, they sent the assembly a circular bearing the title: "A Review of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Reasons why the Methodists in Connection with him should not become Dissenters, or form themselves into a Separate Sect".⁴ As this Conference prohibited the sacramental innovation, the trustees again revealed their satisfaction by their silence during this Conference year.

After the 1793 Conference's concession to the Sacramentarian

¹That is, William Pine, whose name was spelled "Pyne" in the 1767 deed of the Room.

²Bristol Circular of May 11th, 1791, published by W. Pine.

³"An Address from the Trustees, Stewards and Leaders and Others of the Methodist Society in Bristol: To the Preachers in Connection with the Late Rev. Mr. Wesley, met in Conference at Manchester". Bristol, W. Pine, July 20th, 1791.

⁴Published by W. Pine in July, 1792.

party, the seven trustees of the Room and Guinea Street Chapels were the first to express their indignation by sending Conference "a printed letter" accusing it of "a departure from the original plan of Methodism".¹ This letter, replied to by Conference in "An Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies" on August 8th², singled out the Bristol trustees as leaders for the Church party's resistance of the sacramental innovation.

Instrumental in focussing Connexional attention on the Room and Guinea Street Chapel trustees was the peculiarity of their deed of trust. Although by this time the Model Deed, requiring chapels to be settled so that Conference would have the sole right to appoint preachers, had become obligatory³, the deeds of these two chapels had been executed before Conference's legal establishment⁴ and therefore after Wesley's death had passed into the hands of the trustees. This power to appoint preachers, not enjoyed by many chapel trustees, gave the Room and Guinea Street trustees a sense of superiority and also a confidence to assert themselves openly. Moreover, the Room was the first Methodist chapel to be erected⁵,

¹Minutes of Conference, I, p.280.

²Ibid., pp.280-81.

³See E. B. Perkins, Methodist Preaching Houses, p.50.

⁴Conference was established by the Deed of Declaration of 1784, while the latest deed for the Room at this time had been executed on March 14th, 1767. This extant deed is now located in the Council House Archives of the City of Bristol. Guinea Street Chapel's deed is no longer extant, but that it was invested solely in its trustees is evident from the trustees' legal notice to Henry Moore on Aug.11th, 1794, which is quoted in William Myles, A Chronological History of the People Called Methodists..... London, Conference Office, 1813, p.227.

⁵It was erected in 1739.

which gave its trustees a particular distinction. This fact tended to accentuate the attention given to their publications; and so the trustees became notable to some Methodists and notorious to others. Thus Churchmen throughout the Connexion orientated their support towards Bristol, while Sacramentarians tended to focus their apprehension in that direction. As a result, Bristol was fast developing into a trouble spot.

The main factor, however, that caused Bristol to be the scene for the final eruption was local agitation. Henry Moore, ordained by Wesley in 1789, was first stationed in Bristol in 1790. Though he had not officiated with the Sacrament there, his decided view favouring administration by Methodist preachers was well known to the Room trustees¹, and they were suspicious of his plans after Wesley's death. Particularly were they mistrustful of the project for a new worship centre in Bristol to be called Portland Chapel and to be situated on Kingsdown Hill overlooking the Room.² Moore himself credited the plans for the chapel to a Captain Webb³, but the Room trustees were confident that Moore was the main personality

¹Henry Moore in his The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, London, John Kershaw, 1825, Vol.2, p.340, recounts an argument he had with John Wesley in Bristol over lay administration.

²"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p.17.

³Henry Moore, "To the Preachers late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley and all whom it may concern". Bristol, Sept.13th, 1794, p.1.

behind it.¹ The trustees were apprehensive that the services of Portland Chapel would be held during Church hours and that the Sacrament would be administered by episcopally-unordained preachers.² Thus they attempted to thwart the chapel's plans by circulating a report that a parish church was soon to be built near the same spot that would undermine its usefulness,³ and by withholding their financial support.⁴ However, the plans for Portland continued. According to the earliest deed of this chapel, the land was first acquired by George May and Henry Davis on March 23rd, 1792⁵, but the Bristol Mercury gives an account of Henry Moore laying the foundation stone on July 11th, 1791, and preaching from that location on the next day.⁶

The first clash between the Room trustees and the supporters of the new chapel occurred during the sitting of the 1791 Conference. Referring to this Henry Moore says:

¹The Room trustees, "Primitive Methodism Defended". Bristol, W. Pine, July, 1795, p.10. See also "The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p.17.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", p.10.

³H. Moore's Circular of September 13th, 1794, p.1. According to Samuel Bradburn, "An Answer to the Rev. William Embury Edward's Letter to the Occasional Preachers at Portland Chapel". Bristol, Bulgin and Rosser, 1792, p.30, the local vicar had substantiated this report.

⁴Gregory, "Notes from an Old Methodist Journal", p.67.

⁵This deed is in the possession of the Rev. A. T. Johns, superintendent of the Bristol circuit.

⁶Lambert, The Chapel on the Hill, Bristol, St. Stephen's Press, 1929, p.36.

When I returned to Bristol from the Conference at Manchester and was informed of what had happened in my absence, I determined to do everything in my power, to preserve peace even with those troublesome men; and to sacrifice thereto every thing that was not essential to the salvation of souls. I accordingly waited on Mr. Thomas Roberts of Stokes Croft, and, after telling him my fears, proposed to him, that the Trustees of the Room and Guinea Street Chapel should be also Trustees of Portland Chapel; and that, in order to quiet them concerning the Service in Church hours and the Sacrament (which they said was their great objection) a clause should be inserted in the Deed, that neither of them should be used at any Time, without the consent of the Trustees: reserving only to the Conference the right of stationing the Preachers, and executing the Methodist Discipline as heretofore.....I then proposed that the other Trustees of Portland Chapel should be elected Trustees of the Room &c. as often as vacancies¹ should happen, and that thus both should become one....¹

Moore's offer to the Room trustees was a well meaning attempt at a reconcilistion, and at first glance his terms appear to be quite generous. A closer scrutiny of the situation, however, may explain why his proposal was rejected. The deed of the Room provided for only seven trustees² and there were nine Portland trustees at this time.³ Moreover, Portland had not been legally invested in trustees and their number had not then been limited. Therefore, Moore's suggestion of prohibiting service during Church

¹Henry Moore, "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley and all whom it may concern". Bristol, September 13th, 1794.

²Deed of March 14th, 1767.

³Henry Moore, "A Reply to a Pamphlet entitled, Considerations on the Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church", Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794.

hours and the use of the Sacrament "without the consent of the Trustees" was not a real concession, since the voice of the Room trustees could have been overruled at any time by the addition of Portland trustees. Thus Moore's plan failed, and the tension between the two sets of trustees was allowed to mount during the Conference year 1791-92.¹

Portland Chapel was nearly completed when the July Conference of 1792 convened. For "health" reasons, Moore was transferred to the nearby Bath circuit², and Samuel Bradburn was appointed superintendent of the Bristol circuit in his stead. Therefore a month later on August 26th, Bradburn conducted the opening service of Portland Chapel.³ Contrary to the 1792 Conference ruling⁴, the service began at 10.30⁵ during the hours of Church service. At the "request of some of the trustees"⁶, "Thomas Roberts read the prayers, wearing a surplice" while "Bradburn preached in a black gown".⁷ Roberts "read the Liturgy (slightly altered)"⁸, and in his

¹"Primitive Methodism Defended", pp.10-12.

²Ibid.

³Bradburn's sermon on this occasion entitled: "Methodism Set Forth and Defended in a Sermon, on Acts 28:22. Preached at the Opening of Portland-Chapel, Bristol, Aug.26th, 1792", was published in Bristol by Lancaster and Edwards, 1792 (56pp.). Bradburn makes no allusions to the Methodist-Anglican relation but dwells upon Methodist doctrines, experience and practice.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p.260 forbids service during Church hours where it has not been an established custom.

⁵"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-95", p.17.

⁶Thomas Blanshard, The Life of Samuel Bradburn, the Methodist Demosthenes. London, Elliot Stock, 1870, p.153.

⁷R. Burroughs, Ebenezer, 1795-1895. A Centenary History of Old King Street Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol. Bristol, W. Crofton Hemmons, 1895, p.25.

⁸Blanshard, p.153.

prayer "substituted 'all ministers of the Gospel' in the place of 'Bishops and clergy'".¹ This incident confirmed the Room trustees' suspicions, and they lost no time in clamouring against it and reporting it to the local parish priest, the Rev. W. E. Edwards. Edwards responded immediately by publishing a letter "To the Occasional Preachers at Portland Chapel, lately opened in that Parish".²

In his letter the vicar says, "my remarks.....are directed to the mode of your worship, which must be considered as an unwarrantable usurpation"³ and to the use of "wrong measures to promote a right end".⁴ He accuses Bradburn and Roberts of making "the form of our establishment an allurement to procure a Congregation", and adds, "The Dissenter, who withdraws himself..... is guilty of no sort of mockery", but "you are Dissenters.....and yet, you assume the character of.....the clergy of the Church, in open defiance to all order, regularity, and discipline".⁵ It appears from Edwards' letter that the Room trustees had declared that they intended to withdraw from the Methodist Connexion, for Edwards says:

¹Charles Gardner, (MS.) History of Portland Chapel, p.12.

²Rev. W. E. Edwards, "A Letter from the Rev. William Embury Edwards, Minister of Westbury-Upon-Trym, To the Occasional Preachers at Portland Chapel, lately opened in that Parish". Bristol, J. Rudhall, Sept. 7th, 1792.

³Ibid., p.5.

⁴Ibid., p.6

⁵Ibid., p.19.

if, (which I am told is true) some of the members and principal members of your own society, have seriously expostulated with you on this conduct, have even threatened to withdraw, or it may be, have withdrawn from your connection, you will the less wonder at an address from me, for which I offer no apology.¹

Fifteen days after the publishing of Edwards' letter, Samuel Bradburn published a spirited reply.² He says, "We have prepared a communion table, and we have a very convenient burying-place, both of which we mean to use in due time".³ Concerning his use of the "sacerdotal vestments", he says, "But why should this be deemed a crime? You know we have as good a right to wear them as you have."⁴ Finally, turning his attention to the Room trustees, Bradburn comments:

they consider themselves as Church-men, and imagine, that by keeping the room shut in Church-hours, you will give them credit for the sincerity of their profession. I leave you and them to settle that point, as a matter of perfect indifference to me; but this is the cause of divine service not being there in Church-time.⁵

Bradburn's letter was followed by a circular from the Room trustees denouncing the opening service at Portland as an act of separation from the Church. The only record of this publication is found in a printed letter of Samuel Bradburn dated October 5th.⁶

¹Ibid., p.20.

²Samuel Bradburn, "An Answer to the Rev. William Embury Edwards' Letter to the Occasional Preachers at Portland Chapel", Sept.22nd, 1792.

³Ibid., p.7.

⁴Ibid., p.10.

⁵Ibid., pp.13-14.

⁶Samuel Bradburn, "To the People Called Methodists, and all who attend their Chapels". October 5th, 1792.

Apparently from Bradburn's letter, the trustees had particularly revealed their resentment for Bradburn in their circular. This may be understood when it is realised that Bradburn had been ordained by two other Methodist preachers on April 5th, 1792.¹ And since the July Conference of 1792 had expressed its disapproval of such ordinations², the trustees felt justified in their denunciation of Bradburn. Probably the trustees' attitude toward Bradburn had anticipated the August 26th event, and no doubt the fact that it was Bradburn who presided at Portland's opening service tended to emphasise this indignation.

On October 5th, Bradburn replied to the charges of the Room trustees in a circular "To the People Called Methodists"³ by asserting: "But who wants to separate? Not me! I have declaredthat I do not wish the Methodists to separate." Although Bradburn promised not to use the "clerical vestments" in the future, he declares that Portland's service will continue to be held during Church hours, and he calls the trustees' objection to this a "barefaced opposition to the Old Plan". Bradburn maintains that the "real grievance" is that "the Trustees of the Room.....thought

¹According to Stamp, "Memoirs of Charles Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 215, Bradburn was ordained at the Manchester District Meeting on April 5th, 1792, by John Pawson and Thomas Hanby.

²The Minutes of Conference, I, p. 281, declare: "We have never sanctioned ordination in England, either in this Conference or in any other, in any degree, or ever attempted to do it."

³Samuel Bradburn, "To the People Called Methodists, and all who attend their Chapels". Oct. 5th, 1792.

they could rule over both you and Your Preachers." In conclusion, he advises his readers: "be not moved by these.....ambitious men. Burn their Address, and join me in praying to the Lord to turn their hearts".¹

Bradburn seems to have made no attempt to administer the Sacrament at Portland; a clergyman, the Rev. Brian Collins, was employed for this purpose. But according to Charles Gardner, Collins "sowed discord and strife among brethren and did great mischief" adding to the rift between the Portland and Room trustees.² A few months after Collins had been employed, the minute book of the Portland stewards records: "That Portland be henceforth closed against the ministry of the Rev. B. Collins".³ Gardner comments:

we are not surprised at the above application, for we learn from other sources that this Gownsmen sometimes sadly abused the trust reposed in him.he was so indiscreet as to obtrude his high church notions even from the Pulpit, about the administration of the Sacraments.⁴

It appears that the dismissal of the Rev. Collins occurred in the spring of 1793, and that the Sacrament was not administered at Portland until provisions for it were made at a trustee meeting held on June 27th which resolved:

¹Ibid.

²Gardner, History of Portland Chapel, p.18.

³Quoted in Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

That there be a clause in the Deed that the Prayers shall be read in the morning at half-past ten, also service in the afternoon and evening, till the majority of the Trustees shall determine otherwise. That the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper be administered in this Chapel, at least once in every ensuing month, and the Rev. Mr. Baddily, a Gownsmen or Clergyman be requested to officiate in administering the same, and that the Rev. H. Moore be requested to assist at the time.¹

At the time of the above resolution, Moore was stationed in the Bath circuit. The 1793 Conference was to assemble on July 29th, and no evidence suggests that Moore assisted with the Sacrament during the intervening period. This is unlikely because the 1792 Conference had strictly forbidden it. Probably the clause relating to Moore, which is indicative of the Portland trustees' strong desire to receive the Sacrament from him, was inserted in anticipation of the ensuing Conference returning him to Bristol and authorising him to administer at Portland. The Room trustees got wind of this resolution and published a letter maintaining that Portland intended "to form a separate Party, to destroy Old Methodism, etc., etc."²

The Portland trustees replied to the letter of the Room trustees by calling their charges "real slander" with "no foundation but in their evil-surmisings".³ But the essential motive behind this

¹Lambert, The Chapel on the Hill, p.41.

²The reference to this circular and the quotation above is found in the Portland Circular of July 22nd, 1793, entitled: "To the Members of the Methodist-Society in Bristol".

³The Portland Circular of July 22nd, 1793.

circular was to summon a meeting at Portland Chapel of the people who desired the Sacrament from Methodist preachers. The writers declare:

The gross and violent refusal of admission into your Preaching-house by those men, (who because they think they have some legal right to shut or open its doors, would therefore claim a right to refuse you a sacred Ordinance, commanded by Christ) is too painful to dwell upon.

...we wish to consult you upon the Necessity and Propriety of permitting your Brethren who desire it, to enjoy the benefit of this Holy Ordinance at Portland Chapel, without in any degree interfering with the Room or Guinea-Street Chapel: or throwing the smallest impediment in the way of those who go to the established Church.

...we have now done: only we request you to remember the simple Question to be decided Wednesday Evening - SHALL THOSE WHO DESIRE IT, OR WHO SCRUPLE TO RECEIVE IT ELSEWHERE, BE ALLOWED A SACRED ORDINANCE COMMANDED BY CHRIST, AT PORTLAND CHAPEL, OR SHALL THEY NOT? - Shall Christ, the Bible, and Liberty of Conscience be maintained, or shall the arbitrary will of these Gentlemen, who call themselves Methodists, stand and be obeyed both by Preachers and People?¹

The meeting was held on July 24th, and a petition was drawn up and presented to the Conference which convened on July 29th.

Although the 1793 Conference did decide that Methodist preachers could administer the Sacrament "where the whole Society is unanimous for it, and will not be contented without it"², it was not until the ensuing Conference that a list was published disclosing where permission had been granted. Evidence does indicate that Portland

¹Ibid.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p.279.

received the Sacrament during the 1793-94 Conference year¹, but whether it was administered by the Rev. Baddily or by the preachers² assigned to Bristol is debatable. At least, one may be relatively certain that Henry Moore, who was this year returned to the Bath circuit, did not assist with the Sacrament there.³ It is true, however, that Moore administered at Bath and that Bradburn, who was again stationed in the Bristol circuit, administered at Kingswood Chapel located in the Bristol circuit. In a letter to Alexander Kilham, Bradburn says:

I baptize and bury without control: and last Sunday week I gave the Lord's Supper at Kingswood to about four hundred people, many being there from Bristol. ... Our Church bigots here dare not molest me.....I have not a doubt, that, in the next Conference, a simple majority of any society will be allowed the Lord's Supper and something more than that..... Mr. Moore gives the Lord's Supper every month regularly at Bath, and has a blessed work going forward. I really believe the little interruption we met with will do us good. Do not destroy your gown and bands, nor suppose they are for ever done with. You will know better soon, if the Lord will. We must have a Methodist constitution, or plan of discipline explained, and we shall in due time.⁴

¹"An Humble Address to the Methodist Society in General", November, 1794, p.7.

²That is, Bradburn, Richard Rodda, and Richard Elliott.

³The fact that Moore's administration at Portland a year later precipitated the flare-up in Bristol makes it appear illogical that he had previously administered at Portland.

⁴Quoted in Harrison, The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England, p.44.

Bradburn's silence regarding administration at Portland is suggestive that he was not officiating there. During this year also, William Matthews published his The New History, Survey and Description of the City and Suburbs of Bristol, and regarding Portland Chapel, he says:

Portland-street Chapel, Kingsdown, is spacious and handsome, has a large gallery, a turret with a bell, and the service of the Church of England read by preachers in Mr. Wesley's Connection.¹

Surely if Methodist preachers were in the habit of giving the Lord's Supper there, Matthews would have known and mentioned it. But the most conclusive against this is the Room trustees' failure to mention it in their publication² that summarised the events between 1791 and 1794 which provoked the "Bristol Dispute". The silence on this point in the publications of the trustees' opponents after the final eruption also testifies against Methodist preachers officiating at the Sacrament there during the Conference year 1793-94.

Though it may be assumed that the Rev. Baddily alone administered the Lord's Supper at Portland, certainly Bradburn made no effort to conceal his wishes on the matter. And Bradburn's presence on the scene was no small addition to the increasing resentment of the Room trustees. The evidence during the period between the 1793

¹W. Matthews, The New History.....of Bristol. Bristol, W. Matthews, 1794, p.80.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended".

and the 1794 Conference is scanty, and the only information which is suggestive is drawn from the proceedings and the result of a meeting of eight preachers at Lichfield in April, 1794. Thomas Taylor, describing the meeting, says:

We were unanimously of the opinion that some kind of ordination is necessary to prevent confusion; and that every preacher that is admitted shall be admitted by being ordained deacon; and when he is permitted to celebrate the Lord's Supper, they ought to have it.¹

Since Bradburn and Moore composed part of the meeting, the Room trustees must have been particularly vexed. But the meeting had much wider implications, for it provoked a meeting of trustees from all over the Connexion.

The assembly of trustees met in London for the purpose of denouncing the Lichfield meeting and for organising a resistance to a further sacramental concession by Conference. They agreed upon certain proposals and chose delegates to attend the Bristol Conference of July 28th, 1794. These proposals are adumbrated in a circular published in November, 1794:

1. That divine worship should be banished from our Chapels in Church-hours.
2. That the Lord's Supper should not be administered but by the clergy in our Chapels.
3. That our Preachers should not baptize Children.
4. That all Ordination should be renounced, with gowns, bands, titles, etc.
5. And, that they (i.e. trustees) should have greater power in temporal matters than they have had.²

¹Quoted in Blenshard, Life of Bradburn, p.160.

²"An Humble Address to Methodist Societies in General", p.6.

The 1794 Conference opened on July 28th with great apprehension. The first motion regarding the Sacrament was made by Joseph Benson who proposed "that the Conference do confirm and ratify the declaration of last year respecting the sacrament".¹ But this could not be accepted by either the trustees or the Sacramentarians. After hearing the proposals of the trustee delegates, Conference declared that it "would meet their views as far as possible".² Later a committee of the Conference met with the trustee delegates and "the Bristol Trustees", and they agreed on certain terms.³

1st. All ecclesiastical titles...shall be laid aside.....

2ndly. Preaching in church hours shall not be permitted, except for special reasons, and where it will not cause a division.

3rdly. As the Lord's-Supper has not been administered, except where the Society has been unanimous for it, and would not have been contented without it; it is now agreed, that the Lord's-Supper shall not be administered in future, where the union and concord of the Society can be preserved without it.

4thly. The Preachers will not perform the office of baptism, except for the desirable ends of love and concord.....⁴

Although Conference again affirmed, from the argument of Benson, that "the act of admission into the ministry" was "the true scriptural ordination.....to administer the Sacraments",⁵ the

¹Stamp, "Memoirs of the Rev. C. Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 318.

²"Humble Address to Methodist Societies in General", p. 6.

³Ibid.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p. 299.

⁵George Smith, History of Wesleyan Methodism, Vol. II, pp. 101-102.

preachers were authorised to administer only where permission had been granted. And generally, it was understood that the Sacrament should be administered by the senior preachers under the direction of the superintendent.¹ Permission was granted to ninety-three societies from forty-eight of the one hundred and thirty-eight circuits including "Portland, Kingswood, March and Shays or Winterbourne"² from the Bristol circuit.

A few days prior to the opening of Conference the stationing committee had met and had made the appointments for the following year.³ The tension in Bristol was obvious, and it demanded that the committee give this circuit grave consideration. Richard Rodda, having spent the previous year in Bristol without encountering any disagreement from either side, and being a moderate on the current issue, was returned to the circuit. Joseph Benson, who was "applied to by the trustees of the chapels here to spend the next year in this city"⁴, was selected as the circuit superintendent. The third appointment, upon the special request of the Portland trustees⁵, was Henry Moore.

¹Circular of October 21st, 1794, by the Manchester, Salford and Stockport trustees, p.4.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p.295.

³This was the normal procedure. See Ibid., p.247.

⁴Benson's journal, quoted in Treffry, p.184.

⁵H. Moore, "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley and all whom it may concern", Bristol, Sept. 13th, 1794.

The Bristol appointments had remained uncontested until the sacramental resolution was passed. But with the prospects of Moore administering at Portland, the Room trustees requested that Moore be moved to another circuit.¹ In fact, Moore probably foreseeing the trouble he would have, made the same plea.² When this was rejected, the Room trustees proposed that Portland be assigned to the Bath circuit.³ However, all of these suggestions were overruled and Moore was left on the list as the third preacher for Bristol.

So strong was the Room trustees' dissatisfaction over Moore's appointment to Bristol that Conference was fearful of what might occur. Alexander Mather records:

when we were at our wit's end, as to stationing the Preachers for that circuit, so as to preserve the society in peace, and yet gratify all our brethren, especially those who wished for the Sacrament, it was the Trustees of Broadmead and Guinea-street Chapels, who, of their own accord, came in so seasonable to our relief, that we joined together in praising God. For they declared, they had no objection to Mr. Vasey or any other Clergyman's administering the Sacrament in Portland Chapel.⁴

Thomas Vasey was unique in that he had been ordained by John Wesley and later in America by a Bishop White. Therefore,

¹"Primitive Methodism Defended", pp.12-13.

²Henry Moore, Circular of Sept. 13th, 1794.

³Gardner, p.20.

⁴Alexander Mather, "To the Preschers late in Connection with the Rev. Mr. Wesley". Manchester, Oct.27th, 1794.

since he was an episcopally-ordained Methodist preacher, and could apparently satisfy the wishes of both the Portland and the Room trustees, he seemed to be the perfect solution to the problem. Though only three itinerants had been stationed there, the preceding year, it was agreed that the situation warranted Vasey being appointed as a fourth preacher in the Bristol circuit. Charles Gardner says, "so delighted were the preachers with this appointment that they stood up and sang the Doxology".¹

Shortly after Vasey's appointment, one of the preachers said, "And may not Mr. Moore assist brother Vasey?" To this question the entire body of preachers replied, "He might".² Following this, Joseph Benson announced that "he did not know, if it could be done without offence, but he might, in some way, assist too, before the end of the year".³ And thus with all parties in Bristol pacified over the new appointments, Conference's anxiety over Bristol was eased. Reminding the preachers of this in a later publication, Mather says:

And you can readily call to mind, your views then, viz. that you had great confidence, brother Benson and brother Moore would so conduct themselves, as to gain upon the generous Trustees, and influence them, if not to consent, yet not to oppose this innovation.Such were the ideas, and the concord that prevailed then, and defused general joy; as all appeared unwilling to drive matters to any extreme.⁴

¹Gardner, p.19.

²Mather's circular of Oct.27th, 1794.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

But the tranquillity was short lived after the Room trustees heard a report that the Portland trustees planned to continue holding services during Church service hours. There is little doubt where this originated, for on July 25th, three days before Conference had convened, a new deed for Portland Chapel had been drawn up. The following is an extract taken from this deed:

July 25, 1794.for 10/- Geo. May and Henry Davis grant to nineteen Trustees land and Portland Chapel to hold to the use of them there as etc. Upon trust for the preachers appointed by the Conference except such as the Superintendent together with a majority of the Trustees shall appoint. Worship to begin on every Lord's day at half past ten in the forenoon, except on Sacrament Sunday when worship shall begin at ten, and at three in the afternoon and the usual service of the church of England shall be read every Lord's day morning except a majority of the Trustees consent to an alteration in the mode of service.¹

However, the main impetus behind the Room trustees' excitement was a report that Henry Moore was determined to assist with the Sacrament at Portland. Alexander Mather says that the trustees

having gathered from some quarter, that Mr. Moore was determined to administer or assist in administering, at Portland Chapel, (for they had made no objection, with regard to any other place in the circuit) and that you, contrary to their declaration and, after what they thought, condescended for the sake of unity, had authorised him so to do, renewed their declaration, viz. 'That if you did authorise him so to do, and he did so proceed, they would be laid under the disagreeable

¹This deed of Portland Chapel is deposited in the Methodist Church Department for Chapel Affairs in Manchester.

necessity of putting their power in execution'. And, as far as I can now recollect, desired 'you would remove him, if he would not forbear doing it 'at Portland Chapel, where Mr. Vasey might administer'. This unexpected message surprised many of us, and if I may judge by what was said, and seen, caused sorrow in many hearts.¹

Yet despite "this unexpected message", Mather says that Conference closed with the feeling that:

on cool reflection, Mr. Moore would see the propriety of desisting from any thing of the kind, as the people might have the Sacrament without his interference, at the Chapel from one of ourselves, and he have the opportunity of administering at divers places in the Circuit. This was the opinion of those I conversed and travelled with.²

Thus, with the closing of the 1794 Conference, the long period of tension in Bristol reached a final and a dramatic stretching point. The Room trustees' warning that they would expel Moore from their chapels was the most drastic they could have made, while Moore's determination to administer at Portland, and the Portland trustees' desire for him to do so, had been a primary bone of contention between the two parties. If each side carried through its declaration, the tension would undoubtedly break, allowing the grievances of each to erupt and, indeed, spill over into the already tense Connexional situation.

¹Mather's circular of Oct. 27th, 1794.

²Ibid.

CHAPTER SIX

The Flare-up

William Myles, who was present at the 1794 Conference, says:

The Trustees of that Chapel in Bristol.... were exceedingly averse to the Ordinance being allowed to the Societies. They had laboured in this cause a considerable time, and seemed much dissatisfied that more liberal views should prevail. ...and they determined on a more decisive opposition; and to risk all consequences rather than allow the liberty contended for.¹

The 1794 Conference closed on Friday, August 8th. The following Sunday while Thomas Rutherford preached in the Room and announced that Henry Moore would fill the pulpit there on the evening of August 11th², Thomas Coke held the services at Portland Chapel. In the morning Coke announced that the Sacrament would be administered on Sunday evening. Immediately after this service, Mr. Gifford, a class leader of the Portland society, urged Coke not to have Moore assist him.³ But despite the warning given by

¹William Myles, A Chronological History of the People Called Methodists, of the Connexion of the Late Rev. John Wesley; from their rise, in the year 1729, to their last Conference in 1812. London, Conference Office, 1813, p.225.

²Circular of August 18th, 1794, "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley from the Trustees and Leaders of Portland Chapel". Signed also by T. Coke, S. Bradburn, T. Rutherford and R. Elliott. Published in Bristol.

³Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794, "To the Preachers Late in Connection with the Rev. Mr. Wesley". Signed by Benson, Rodda and Vasey.

the Room trustees to Henry Moore before Conference, and despite the presence of the episcopally-ordained Thomas Vasey¹, Coke passed over Vasey and requested that Henry Moore² and Thomas Taylor³ assist him in administering the elements at the Sunday evening service.

The tension between the Room trustees and Henry Moore was apparent at the 1794 Conference, and Thomas Coke was fully aware that his decision to have Moore assist him with the Sacrament would lead to serious consequences in Bristol. George Smith has it that Coke did not appear on the scene until after the flare-up⁴ but in reality Coke was the agent who promoted it. And what Smith says about chapel trustees selecting Bristol as the "Place for the struggle"⁵ might better have been said of Coke. Although Coke was an impetuous⁶ and dramatic⁷ individual who, according to Wesley, acted "often too hasty"⁸, he had formerly clashed with the Room

¹Circular of August 30th, 1794, "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. Mr. Wesley, and all Others whom it may concern". From the Room trustees.

²Circular of August 18th, 1794, from the Portland trustees.

³Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794, from Benson, Rodda and Vasey.

⁴G. Smith, II, p.105.

⁵Ibid., p.104.

⁶See Wesley's Letters, VIII, p.211 and also Wesley's Journal, VIII, p.61.

⁷Wesley's Letters, VIII, p.230.

⁸Wesley's Journal, VIII, p.22.

trustees on two important issues, and it appears that his decision to have Moore assist him was premeditated and deliberately for the purpose of bringing these issues to a head.¹

The most important of these issues for Coke² was that regarding the settling of chapels so that Conference would have the sole right of appointing and removing preachers.³ He had first encountered this issue during a controversy with the Birstal trustees in 1782. Birstal Chapel, which had been erected in the 1760's, was settled "in the Presbyterian form, giving twelve or thirteen persons power not only of placing, but even of displacing, the Preachers at their pleasure".⁴ At Coke's own request, Wesley sent him to Birstal to draw up a new deed for this chapel.⁵ But the trustees refused to alter their deed, so the 1782 Conference resolved that a new chapel should be erected in Birstal.⁶ Coke appears to have led in the collection of funds for this chapel.⁷

¹Unfortunately, all of Coke's biographers are conspicuously silent on this episode in his life, but evidence from other sources will contribute to its understanding.

²Coke was a doctor of Law and always exhibited an interest in the legal side of Connexional affairs.

³This is usually referred to as "the settling of chapels on the Conference Plan".

⁴Arminian Magazine, 1788, Vol.11, p.149.

⁵See Benson's letter to Wesley of Nov.16th, 1782, found in the Watkinson Collection, II:176.

⁶Minutes of Conference, I, p.158.

⁷See Coke's, "An Address to the Inhabitants of Birstal, and the Adjacent Villages". Leeds, J. Bowling, 1782. This was written on Nov.1st, two months after Conference had met. The plans for this new chapel did not materialise.

Coke next ran into conflict with the Room trustees on the same grounds. The Room, which had originally been invested in John Wesley on June 29th, 1739¹, underwent a new deed on March 14th, 1767, which conveyed the property to John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and to seven trustees, with the latter having the right to nominate preachers for the chapel after the decease of the former parties.² When Dr. Coke learned of this, he was disturbed and went to the trustees to persuade them to alter their deed. At a meeting on July 29th, 1783, they considered this proposal, but rejected it declaring that there was no need, since "we wish to act in concurrence with ye Conference as long as they continue to support Mr. Wesley's Doctrines".³ This dissatisfied Coke, and taking another step to further his aim, he obtained permission from the 1783 Conference to tour England in order to settle chapels on the Conference Plan.⁴

Five years later Coke again encountered difficulty, this time with the trustees of Dewsbury Chapel. The trustees maintained their right to appoint preachers, and so on September 5th, 1788, Coke published an account reproving them.⁵ In the light of the

¹This deed is located in the Council House Archives of the City of Bristol.

²Located in the Council House Archives of the City of Bristol.

³John S. Simon, John Wesley the Last Phase. London, Epworth Press, 1934, p.203.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p.167.

⁵T. Coke, "The State of Dewsbury-House, in Yorkshire; Being a Vindication of the Conduct of the Conference respecting it".

difficulties between Conference and the Dewsbury trustees, the Room trustees, on September 20th, 1788, expressed to Wesley their willingness to alter their deed.¹ Apparently Coke had also been strong in denunciation of the Room trustees and particularly of their leader, Henry Durbin, but on the day following the trustees' promise, he formally apologised. Wesley writes on September 21st that:

An end was put to the long contest between Dr. Coke and Mr. Durbin, by the doctor acknowledging that the words he had wrote were too keen, and that he was sorry he had given Mr. D. so much uneasiness.²

Unfortunately the trustees did not fulfil their promise, and it may be inferred that Coke also retracted his apology.

Thus the settling of chapels on the Conference Plan was of vital importance to Coke. For him "the grand point" was that trustees ought not "to have power, by themselves, and of their own authority alone, to reject any Preacher sent to them by the Conference".³ Although trustees had not yet used this "power", Coke was fearful of the future. Particularly had he been concerned with the Room, because, it being the oldest chapel in the Connexion, an alteration of its deed would act as an example for other chapels not properly settled. However, though he had run into occasional difficulties from other sources in his efforts to settle chapels,

¹Wesley's Journal, Vol. 7, p. 436.

²Ibid., p. 437.

³Coke, "The State of Dewsbury-House", p. 3.

his arch-enemies had steadily been the Room trustees. Consequently, it is little wonder that Coke so readily accepted their challenge when they threatened to expel Henry Moore, for their doing so would bring matters to a head.

In addition, Coke had clashed with the Room trustees, though more indirectly, over the issue regarding the Church relation and the sacramental innovation. The latter had been especially disturbed over Wesley's ordination of Coke and its threat to the Methodist-Anglican relation. In a letter to Charles Wesley, Henry Durbin explains how "Dr. Coke was re-ordained", and adds: "If you were thunderstruck before, I think your brother's printed declaration of ordination a louder clap."¹

After Wesley's death, Coke's connections with the Sacramenterian party were bound to lead him into further disagreements with the Room trustees. Evidence reveals that in 1791 when money was being raised for the erection of Portland Chapel amid the opposition of the Room trustees, Coke met with ten other Sacramenterian preachers to assist in this campaign.² With the exception of one of these preachers³, Coke contributed from his own pocket the largest amount of money.⁴ Later his strong declarations in favour of administration by Methodist preachers at the 1793 Conference incurred the disfavour

¹This letter is quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.2, p.103.

²Gardner, History of Portland Chapel, p.9.

³That is, Thomas Roberts.

⁴Ibid.

of the Room trustees, and it appears that they withheld their support from his campaign to raise funds for the mission work.¹ However, nine months later in April, 1794, the displeasure of the trustees over Coke's role at the 1793 Conference grew into alarm when they heard how he had summoned a meeting in Lichfield to propose, what is commonly known as, the "Bishops Plan".²

At the 1794 Conference, as previously seen, the Room trustees loudly remonstrated against the Lichfield meeting and the sacramental innovation. Certainly they were the centre of attention at this Conference, because of their outcry against the possibility of Henry Moore administering at Portland. Jonathan Crowther blamed "all of the difficulties and distresses we passed through" on these trustees.³ Coke, who was secretary of this Conference, must have been equally annoyed, and doubtless his attitude toward the trustees hardened. *

¹J. W. Etheridge, The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, D.C.L. London, John Mason, 1860, p.256, says: "In one respect.....he regretted.....that he had been led to make so open a demonstration on the subject; since.....in begging for the missions, he found that some of his best subscribers.....now gave him significant tokens of the disapproval with which they regarded the innovations he had done so much to promote." It is reasonable to assume that the wealthy Room trustees, who were quick to withhold their support from Portland Chapel on the same basis, were among those "best subscribers" referred to by Etheridge. That these trustees were wealthy by Methodist standards in those days is evident from W. Matthew, The New History of Bristol, 1794. Matthew publishes a directory in which 3,500 of Bristol's then 100,000 population are listed. Among the Room trustees he lists: H. Durbin - chemist; J. Curtin - warehouse owner; N. Gifford - Esq.; W. Green - gentleman; W. Pine - printer of the Bristol Gazette; T. Roberts - wine merchant; and D. Wait - grocer.

²G. Smith, II, pp.98-100.

³J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", Bristol, R. Edwards, Nov.10th, 1794, pp.13-14.

To Coke's legal mind, the permission given to Moore by this Conference to assist with the Sacrament at Portland was important and would be a strong instrument in assaulting the trustees' entrenched position. And one may surmise that he decided then that the matter must be soon brought to a test. All of this, seen in the light of Coke's earlier disagreements with the Room trustees makes it clear why he decided to request Moore to assist him with the Sacrament at Portland two days after Conference closed.

Turning to Henry Moore, the motive behind his decision to assist Coke is perhaps more obvious. Moore was as beloved by the Portland trustees, who held a prayer meeting prior to the 1793 Conference to pray that he would be appointed to Bristol so that they might receive the Sacrament from his hands¹, as he was disapproved of by the Room trustees. And his open stand in favour of administration by Methodist preachers influenced the former trustees in their desire for the Sacrament², while it had been the original cause for the Room trustees' apprehension regarding the erection of Portland Chapel.

For three years the Room trustees had accused Moore of

¹"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p.18.

²In their Circular of August 30th, 1794, the Room trustees accuse Moore of this. That a change had taken place is evident from the fact that B. Tucker, a class leader at Portland, and J. Ewer, W. Capel, H. Collings and J. Pimm, all Portland trustees, had endorsed a circular of July 20th, 1791, which had denounced administration by "our own Preachers", and yet on August 18th, 1794, these five men signed a circular approving of administration by Methodist preachers.

abandoning the "Old Plan" by attempting to disturb the union with the Church. Moore had long since grown weary of their cries against him and Portland Chapel, for he had no intention of causing a separation. In fact, he wrote a pamphlet to refute the charge that Methodists had separated.¹ But the trustees had singled him out as their chief enemy, had blamed the innovations adopted by Portland Chapel on him, and had interfered with the activities of this chapel in every way they could. Jonathan Crowther says:

The Trustees and friends of Portland-Chapel did not wish or attempt to interfere with the Room and Guinea-Street-Chapels; but the Trustees of the Room and Guinea-Street-Chapels would interfere with, and dictate to the friends of Portland-Chapel.² This is precisely the grand point of debate.

With this source of constant irritation for three years, one is not astonished that Moore defied their warning.

It has already been seen how the 1794 Conference implicitly granted Moore permission to administer at Portland; how the Room trustees' remonstrance over this resulted in Thomas Vasey being stationed in Bristol. This latter move, being intended as a means for pacifying both the Room and the Portland trustees, was based on the assumption that Moore would forbear administering at Portland. All parties seemed satisfied over this, and, as described,

¹H. Moore, "A Reply to a Pamphlet, entitled, Considerations on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church". Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794.

²J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", pp.11-12.

so overjoyed were the preachers that they stood up and sang the doxology. "In that unguarded moment", Alexander Mather says, "you (i.e. the Conference) were drawn in to give your consent to a proposal made nearly in these words. 'And may not Mr. Moore assist brother Vasey?'"¹ Although this decision came in an "unguarded moment", it was seized eagerly by Moore. Upon this, now explicit, permission Moore's position pivoted and was strengthened, for behind him swung the weight of Conference authority bolstering with legality his convictions and intentions. Therefore, when the Room trustees announced that they would expel him from their chapels if he should administer at Portland, Moore, who was not a man to shy away when his convictions were concerned², viewed it as a direct challenge to what was his right and determined to accept it at the earliest moment.

The report that Moore had assisted Coke with the Sacrament must have been received by the Room trustees the same evening, August 10th, because they delivered to Moore an attorney's letter by noon of the following day.³ Their letter is as follows:

¹Mather's Circular of Oct.27th, 1794.

²Henry Moore, in his The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, II, p.340, explains how he stood up to John Wesley in asserting his views regarding administration. Mrs. R. Smith, The Life of the Rev. Mr. Henry Moore, p.127, describes how Moore resisted the resolutions of the Lichfield meeting. While Lord-Chancellor Lyndhurst, "Dr. Warren's Chancery Suit", The Methodist Magazine, 1835, Vol.58, p.311, reveals how Moore, at a much later date, stood his ground first against the London superintendent, then the London District Meeting, and finally against Conference itself on the principle that Wesley's will had granted him jurisdiction over City-Road Chapel.

³Portland Circular of August 18th, 1794.

We, the undersigned, Trustees for the Methodist Preaching House called the New Room in the Horse-Fair, and also for Guinea-street Chapel, do give you this Notice, that you are not appointed by us to preach or expound God's holy word in either of those places, and that no other person or persons have or hath any legal right to make that appointment but only we the Trustees: we therefore forbid and caution you against attempting trespassing upon the above Trust Premises, as you will answer it at your peril.

(Signed) Henry Durbin; Daniel Lane; William Pine; Daniel Wait, Jun.; John Curtis; William Green; ¹ Edward Stock; Thomas Roberts; Nathaniel Gifford.

Although this action of the Room trustees was a serious challenge to Conference's right to station preachers, and though it was to have alarming repercussions throughout the Connexion, the trustees had little thought of this when they sent their letter to Moore. In fact, contrary to all secondary sources which have treated the Bristol Dispute, the trustees were not primarily motivated by an effort to check the sacramental innovation. In reality, by this time they had largely displaced their cause for preserving the Church relation with a personal animosity for Henry Moore and Portland Chapel.

In the beginning the Room trustees acted mainly from a fear that Methodism would separate from the Church, and they accused Moore of "attempting to introduce the Sacrament"² and planning "to open the above Chapel (i.e. Portland) in Church Hours".³ But

¹W. Myles, Chronological History, p.227.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", p.12.

³Ibid., p.10.

three years' contention had resulted in their subordinating this cause to a "Contention.....about one Man".¹ Asserting that "our dispute was not with the Conference, but with Mr. Moore"², the trustees explain:

.....three Years Contention: In which Mr. Moore and his Party expected to gain a complete Conquest over the old Methodists, and subject them to their dissenting Scheme, or drive them from the Connection.³

The Connexional controversy, that is, "the Churchmen vs. the Sacramentarians" had, in Bristol, become "The Room Trustees vs. Henry Moore and Portland Chapel".

That the trustees were no longer vitally engaged in an effort to check lay administration is apparent by the fact that nothing was heard from them when Adam Clarke, who was not ordained, administered the Sacrament at Portland Chapel three months earlier on the evening of May 10th, 1794.⁴ More remarkable, Clarke was even permitted to give the Sacrament at the Room.⁵ Nor were the trustees heard from when lay preachers officiated at a Communion service at Portland during the sitting of the 1794 Conference.⁶

¹Circular of August 30th, 1794, sent by the Room trustees.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", pp.14-15.

³Circular of August 30th, 1794.

⁴Gregory, "Notes from an old Methodist Journal", p.68.

⁵Ibid., p.67. See also Benson's Circular of Sept.29th, 1794.

⁶Burroughs, Ebenezer, p.28.

But the most convincing evidence is derived from the Room trustees' relation to the 1794 Conference. Though the trustees were quite willing to accept the sacramental resolution of this Conference¹, they were so opposed to Moore administering that they proposed that he be moved to another circuit²; and failing this, they requested that Portland be placed in another circuit.³ When this was rejected, the trustees announced that they did not oppose Moore administering in other chapels in the Bristol circuit so long as he did not do so in Portland.⁴ The problem appeared to be settled when Vasey was assigned to Bristol, as he could fulfil the requirements at Portland, and Moore was free to administer elsewhere.⁵ This gave the trustees the assurance and confidence⁶ necessary for them to declare that if Moore "did so proceed, they would be laid under the disagreeable necessity of putting their power in execution".⁷ These observations cause one to conclude that the object of the trustees' attack must have been Henry Moore and Portland Chapel rather than the sacramental innovation as George Smith contends.⁸

¹"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p.6.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", pp.12-13.

³Gardner, History of Portland Chapel, p.20.

⁴Mather's Circular of Oct.27th, 1794.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Primitive Methodism Defended", p.13.

⁷Mather's Circular of Oct.27th, 1794.

⁸G. Smith, II, p.25.

Once the trustees had sent their notice, their motive made little difference. The action left them immediately open to a serious charge. Though the Room was not the only chapel whose deed authorised its trustees to reject a preacher appointed by Conference, this was the first time the right had been employed, and it was natural that Moore would not overlook this threat to Conference authority in his response to their notice.

On the afternoon of August 11th, the day on which Moore received his notice, the stewards and leaders of Portland Chapel along with a few of the preachers who were still in Bristol assembled in Moore's apartment at 5 o'clock:

and, after due consideration and prayer, were fully convinced, that the most sacred privileges of the Conference and of the whole Methodist Connexion were violated by this act of the Trustees. They therefore unanimously advised and requested Mr. Moore to go to the Room at the appointed hour, to read to the Congregation the notice he had received, and to inform them, that being thus prevented from discharging his duty in that place, he should preach immediately in Portland-Chapel.¹

Moore then sent the trustees a notice "that he would comply with their will and not attempt to preach from their pulpit".² Soon after sending this notice, he went to the Room where a congregation had gathered for the evening service. Seeing that the trustees stood in the pathway to the pulpit³, Moore turned to them and

¹Circular of Aug. 30th, 1794.

²Mrs. R. Smith, Life of Henry Moore, p.129.

³Ibid.

declared:

that their resistance was an open renunciation of the authority of the Conference, which had appointed him to preach in that chapel, as well as in every other in the circuit; but out of respect to its authority, he had thus come to appear at his post, and to shew his own willingness to abide by his duty.¹

He then announced "in a firm voice" that though they had power to repel him from their pulpit, they could not restrict him from preaching the Gospel, and therefore he would "proceed up the hill to Portland Chapel where the word of God was not bound".² As Moore left the chapel, "instantly the Congregation (the Trustees and a few of their Friends excepted) rose up as one Man, and cried out, 'We will all follow you'; which they accordingly did."³ The actual response of the Congregation is questionable, for the trustees contend that "near two-thirds were left behind; and those that went off were principally his Party, who had prior Notice of the Business, and came there for that Purpose."⁴

On the following evening of Tuesday, August 12th, Moore attended the regular leaders meeting at which he asked whether there was a charge to be brought against him.

¹Ibid., p.130.

²Mrs. R. Smith, Life of Henry Moore, p.130.

³Circular of August 18th, 1794.

⁴Circular of August 30th, 1794.

Then a Trustee said, 'Sir, we have a legal power to appoint Preachers for these Chapels. We have appointed three, and we do not choose to appoint a fourth'. Mr. Moore replied that if they acted as men separated from and independent of the Methodist Connexion, the answer was proper; but, if they professed themselves Members of it, their answer was altogether improper, for it tended to the total overthrow of Methodism.¹

Six days later, on Monday, August 18th, Thomas Coke, Samuel Bradburn, Thomas Rutherford and Richard Elliot and forty-six leaders, trustees and stewards of Portland Chapel circulated a letter² throughout the Connexion explaining the manner in which the Room trustees had expelled Moore from their chapels. The writers say:

Not content with enjoying their own Christian privileges and trust rights in their fullest extent, without any restraint or molestation whatsoever; they have invaded ours, and have expelled from their houses a member of the Conference (against whom they could bring no shadow of complaint), merely because he assisted in the administration of a sacred ordinance, with respect to which human compulsion is an abomination.³

They continue:

We have gotten by a remarkable providence a large piece of ground, within a small distance of the room in the Horsefair; and, as the people are all zealous in this important matter, we trust to have a chapel soon erected.⁴

¹Circular of August 18th, 1794.

²Ibid. The circular is entitled: "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley".

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

Since the main point of contention in the circular was the "unwarranted" act of aggression of the Room trustees against a preacher appointed by Conference, the circular is careful, regarding the erection of this new chapel, to explain:

And as we honour the memory of our late Father, (as well as his sons of the Gospel), it shall be settled in that way which was recommended by him, so that no Member of your Body shall ever be expelled from it, merely because it is the pleasure of a few oppressive men.¹

Soon after the publication of this circular, Moore, Coke and Rutherford wrote joint letters to some of their special friends.² One of these MS. letters to a Mr. King at Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, dated August 25th, says:

Last Tuesday (i.e. Aug. 12th, the day following Moore's reception of the trustees' letter) we began to build and shall have a noble Chapel in the Horsefair for the Conference..... God is with us, and the People are with us, and every Preacher who regards the right of the Conference to station the Preachers, will surely be with us also. Such an attack on that right - on Liberty of Conscience - and on Justice, has not, we think, been known before in the Annals of Methodism. But blessed be God, Trustee Tyranny is now at an end in Bristol! ...

Near 400 pounds were subscribed in about three hours. The Classes have fully declared for us (or rather for the Conference) out of 52: and the private members of the others are coming in by six score and 10.³

¹Ibid.

²George Smith, II, p.108 says that he had in his hands one of the Aug. 18th circulars upon which was written an explanation of the plans for the new chapel in the handwriting of Coke. The words quoted by Smith are an exact replica of the MS. letter before me to Mr. King. Probably Coke, Moore and Rutherford agreed on a letter which was written on the circular and then together made several copies to send to certain individuals.

³MS. letter to Mr. King from Coke, Moore and Rutherford. The phrase "or rather for the conference" was inserted above the line between "us" and "out" later by the writer.

Thus the Portland's trustees along with the preachers who remained in Bristol to support Moore were losing no time in their retaliation against the Room trustees, for the day following Moore's reception of his notice, plans were begun for the erection of this new chapel to supersede the Room. At the first meeting of the building committee, held on August 19th, it was decided that:

Ground is to be purchased of Mr. Benjamin Tucker fronting the Horse-fair and King Street for a Chapel, which is to be built exactly on the plan of the Methodist Chapel in Oldham Street, Manchester.

He (i.e. Mr. Tucker) is to be the sole builder. He will build the Chapel and be paid by an estimate or by Day-work, or by measurement, as the Committee choose. And he will give a Bond with 500 pounds penalty to finish the Chapel by the 1st of May, 1795.¹

Thomas Coke, Samuel Bradburn, Henry Moore and Thomas Rutherford, along with eight laymen², affixed their signatures to the proceeding. On the following day, another meeting was held at the house of Mr. Tucker; a secretary and treasurer of the committee were chosen, and five new members were added, bringing the total number to thirteen.³ The committee decided to hold weekly as well as monthly meetings and "when the sum of 1000 pounds is

¹MS. Minute Book of King St. Chapel.

²i.e. B. Tucker, J. Ewer, R. Boley, J. Pimm, W. Capel, W. Hartland, W. Hunt, and J. W. Lancaster.

³Minute Book of King St. Chapel. The five members added to the committee were Captain Webb, Stephens, J. Hall Jun., Harper and J. Pearce.

received for the New Chapel in Kings-Street, a subscription is to be opened for a New Chapel near Guinea-Street".¹ It was decided that the deed should be conveyed to Dr. Coke, who:

is to give a Bon^d of 2000 pounds to Messrs. Moore and Rutherford in the name of the Conference..... engaging that he will settle the New Chapel on the Conference Plan within three months after the Chapel is completed".²

Three days later on Saturday, August 23rd, the ground for King Street Chapel was conveyed to Coke who agreed to lay out 2500 pounds for building within the next two years.³

In the meanwhile, the Room trustees were preparing a circular to explain their own side of the dispute. This publication which appeared on August 30th, was mainly concerned with a declaration of the writers' loyalty to the "Old Plan" and with a demonstration of the manner in which Moore and the Portland party had abandoned this plan. The trustees deny the charge that they have "violated 'the most sacred Privileges of Conference'", and, moreover, they maintain that Moore himself has "violated the Resolutions of Conference, in attempting to introduce the Sacrament, &c., where it was not unanimously requested".⁴ Commenting on the August 18th circular,

¹While King Street chapel was to be located a few yards from the New Room, the second chapel was to be located near the Guinea Street chapel.

²Minute Book of King Street Chapel, Aug. 20th, 1794.

³Deed of King Street Chapel of Aug. 23rd, 1794, which is now in the keeping of the Rev. A. T. Johns in Bristol.

⁴They are referring to Conference's 1793 resolution, but this had been superseded by the 1794 resolution.

the Room trustees remark:

The Writer found it his Interest to.....
bring forward only one Day's Transaction out
of three Years Contention: In which Mr. Moore
and his Party expected to gain a complete
Conquest over the old Methodists, and subject
them to their dissenting Scheme..... So that
the specious Reasoning.....respecting the
Opposition of the Trustees to the Conference,
&c., is only calculated to work upon the
Passions of the People and to mislead them.¹

Thus, the long period of tension in Bristol had finally reached a climax. The Room trustees' warning to Moore had been, at Coke's instigation, rejected, and the trustees in turn had expelled Moore from their chapels. This had been followed by the decision to build an opposition chapel to replace the Room and by circulars from both parties accusing the other of a disregard for Conference authority. All of these events had preceded the arrival of Joseph Benson. Therefore all eyes in Bristol turned expectantly to Benson, as the legal head of the circuit, to appeal their respective cases and to await his decision.

¹Circular of August 30th, 1794.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Joseph Benson's Decision

Benson's views on the sacramental issue were perplexing to his contemporaries. His sentiments had first been expressed in June, 1791, when he signed his name to a circular denouncing lay administration¹; however, one month later at the 1791 Conference he proposed that the reception into the ministry, without the laying on of hands, qualified a preacher to administer the sacraments.² Hence, one writer declared: "It would be easy to write a pamphlet with this title, 'Benson against Benson'".³

In reality, Benson was not concerned with the sacramental issue per se. He consistently advocated some form of compromise which respected the wishes of both sides in order that Connexional unity might be safeguarded. Prior to the 1793 Conference he declared that "it must be administered to them where the people claim it".⁴, and later at the Conference he maintained that "where the people will not be divided, they ought to have the ordinance".⁵

The disturbances which broke out after the 1793 Conference's

¹Birmingham Circular of June 21st, 1791.

²G. Smith, II, pp.100-101.

³"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p.9.

⁴B. Rhodes, "The Point Stated", p.21.

⁵"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p.9.

sacramental concession caused Benson anxiety, and he spent much of his time attempting to settle the situation. During this Conference year, Benson acted as an arbitrator and restored peace to the Stockport¹, the Wednesbury², the Dudley³, the Birmingham⁴ and the Manchester⁵ societies. In each case he endeavoured to sustain a compromise whereby each side would respect the views of the other.

During the latter part of July, he journeyed to Bristol "which afforded him the opportunities of knowing the state and circumstances of the society"⁶, and, Benson says in his journal:

I have been applied to by the trustees of the chapels here to spend the next year in this city; and having sought direction of God, and committed the matter to him, I have consented, if the brethren in the Conference think it best to appoint me.⁷

The tension between the Sacramentarians and the Churchmen during the previous year was heightened by the presence of delegates from the trustee meeting held in London at the Bristol Conference of 1794. Benson expressed his apprehension when he addressed the assembly of trustees and preachers on Sunday, July 27th. Choosing I Cor. 12:25 as his text, he spoke on the subject:

¹Macdonald, p.253.

²Ibid., p.264.

⁴Ibid.

⁶Treffry, p.184.

⁷Quoted in Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

"That there should be no schism in the body".¹ But on the following day when Conference officially opened, Benson wrote:

Alas! next day I found both parties were mutually opposed to each other; and that those whom the reproof and exhortation most suited, were least disposed to take them.²

Since the Churchmen opposed the 1793 sacramental resolution and since the Sacramentarians desired a further concession, Benson hoped for a compromise and suggested that "Conference do affirm and ratify the declaration of last year respecting the sacraments".³ But neither side was in a mood for such a measure and it was rejected. Conference finally resolved to allow the sacrament where the "union" and "concord" could not be preserved without it.⁴

On the whole, both sides seemed content with the resolution, and without any opposition from the Room trustees, several of the Bristol societies were granted permission to have the Sacrament. So pleased was Benson over this that he:

begged to know, if he were excluded from the work and blessing of the Lord's Supper, in the late decree. It was loudly proclaimed from every side of the house, 'by no means - by no means'.⁵

After the Moore-appointment upset, the subsequent peace-restoring

¹Ibid., p.185.

²Ibid.

³A. Steven, History of Methodism, II, p.271.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p.299.

⁵"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p.7.

Vasey appointment, and the permission given to Moore to assist Vasey with the Sacrament, Benson announced that, "he did not know, if it could be done without offence, but he might, in some way, assist too, before the end of the year".¹

Toward the end of the Conference when the Room trustees gave Moore their warning, Benson was so disturbed that he moved that Vasey "administer the Sacrament alone in Portland-Chapel".² But Benson "was justly reproached for bringing forward this motion, when near half of the preachers were gone, and it was spurned with indignation".³ With the likelihood of a dispute in Bristol, Benson says:

Seeing no prospect of peace, I determined, if possible, to get myself appointed for another circuit. But many of the Preachers being gone to their circuits, those that remained were unwilling to alter what had been done, so that the Conference broke up, and I remained upon the list for Bristol.⁴

During his return to Manchester after the Conference, Benson's mind was unsettled regarding his appointment. Travelling in the same coach with Alexander Mather, John Pawson and Adam Clarke, he says that all three "strongly advised me to go to Bristol as appointed".⁵ He arrived in Manchester sometime between August 10-12th

¹Mather's Circular of Oct. 27th, 1794.

²"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p. 7.

³Ibid.

⁴Macdonald, p. 268.

⁵Ibid.

and must have received word of the Room trustees' notice to Moore by August 14th because prior to August 16th, Pawson, then in Liverpool, had heard from Benson on the subject.¹

The first extant letter to Benson regarding the dispute was written by Thomas Coke on August 14th from Newcastle, Pembrokeshire. Although the letter was addressed to Benson at Manchester, Coke adds a postscript saying that "This letter will be put into the Bristol Post-Office". Probably Coke had sent the letter to Bristol for Henry Moore's scrutiny. Since it is unlikely that Benson received Coke's letter before August 18th, he had previously been informed of the situation by another party. Coke's letter is as follows:

I cannot satisfy my conscience, if I do not write a few words to you. You seem now placed in a very awful situation. Your very considerable abilities make the circumstances of Your case, peculiarly important. You have been a very useful man in your time: but it is perhaps in your power now to do more harm, than ever you did or will do good.I see clearly that the moment you make yourself a party-man in Bristol, the scabbard of that Sword which has been already drawn, will be thrown away. You will be the Head of a party; You will perhaps be more honourable than ever, with a few words by men. You certainly will be peculiarly honoured by your own party. But what is all this to Your (I know) disinterested mind. Alas! the Glory will be departed. Your genuine usefulness will be over. Your remaining Life will be spent in what is infinitely worse than nothing.You may in the violence of party-debate and party-spirit, root up

¹Pawson's reply to Benson's letter, which is dated August 16th, is quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.8, pp.122-23.

some tares: but think You that You will tear up none of the wheat? Yes, my dear Sir, if You set yourself at the head of a party, thousands may find on that day of judgment that Your conduct was the means of their eternal ruin.¹

Evidently Coke had strong suspicions that Benson would lend his support in some way to the Room trustees.

Conference's late proceedings had fully acquainted Coke with Benson's attitude regarding the sacramental innovation. He had seen that Benson was not predisposed on the issue and was unlikely to take sides with either party. Moreover, Benson had consistently acted as an arbitrator in other sacramental disputes, and it was likely that he would adopt this position upon his arrival in Bristol. Thus it appears certain that Benson's stand on the subject of innovations would not have prompted Coke to write him in such a tone.

However, the issue respecting the settlement of chapels on the Conference Plan, so significant to Coke, was also involved, and precisely upon this issue Coke had previously encountered an indirect opposition from Benson. Their views had first conflicted regarding the Birstal Chapel case in 1782² and later over the Dewsbury Chapel case in 1788-89. A letter written by Benson to Thomas Rankin on October 5th, 1789, regarding the latter case,

¹MS. Letters of Methodist Preachers, V:14. (Located in the archives of the Book Room in London).

²See Benson's letters on this subject found in the Watkinson Collection, II:176 and 177.

reveals Benson's stand respecting chapels which were not settled on the Conference Plan. He says:

.....the bone of contention.....is one of those non-essentials which may be determined this way or that, and yet every important truth be taught and believ'd, and every manifest duty inculcated and performed.if the one side had not.....grace enough to yield, the other should.....I believe.....if pious and able men had been sent them.....they never would have objected to receive them.

I.....appeal to.....Jesus, a religion of peace and love: And I ask where does this religion..... which is pure, peaceable, gentle and, in matters not essential to salvation of mankind, easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits,..... permit our dividing.....about the modes of settling the Places they assemble in, or any thing of such a trivial nature. (I say of a trivial nature; for if God is not with us the best form of settling Preaching-houses.....will not perpetuate the work, and if love do not keep us together, the best forms of settlement as to places of worship will not.)

.....I appeal to the plan we have been upon from the beginning: and I ask what is it?..... Why to preach no where, but in places settled upon us? Surely no: but to preach wherever we could find an open door: in Church if permitted, Chapels, Meeting-houses-private houses, barns-stables- or even Market.¹

Although Benson did not oppose the Conference Plan for settling chapels, he considered it as he did the sacramental issue, a "trivial" matter to dispute over and "not essential to the salvation of mankind". So opposed was Benson to controversy regarding the "non-essential" of settling chapels that in 1792, according to Alexander Kilham, "Mr. Benson sat down and wept when the contention in London, instead

¹Watkinson Collection, II:180.

of being accommodated, seemed likely to end in a lawsuit".¹

On the other hand Coke was determined in his resistance to trustees whose chapels were not properly settled, and the situation in Bristol was of particular significance because, distinct from the Birstal and the Dewsbury cases, the trustees had actually exerted the right given to them by their deed. The situation there appeared especially crucial to Coke. He felt that if the trustees successfully exercised this power, then other trustees might attempt a similar measure. If they were checked, it would suffice as a warning to other trustees; thus the strong effort to check the Room trustees with plans for an opposition chapel. And Coke, who promised to give a bond for £2,000 for the new chapel², was the primary personality behind this plan.

Now if, as it appeared likely to Coke, Benson came to Bristol as an arbitrator to restore peace, it would undermine Coke's plans for an opposition chapel and his cause against trustee power. Furthermore, it was crucial that Benson should not preach in the chapels of these trustees, which in effect would nullify the meaning of the opposition chapel. Therefore, from Coke's point of view, Benson was "placed in a very awful situation".

About the same time as he received Coke's letter, Benson also

¹Mather, Pawson and Benson, "A Defence of the Conduct of the Conference in the Expulsion of Alexander Kilham. Addressed to the Methodist Societies". 1796, p.10.

²Minute Book of King Street Chapel, August 20th, 1794.

received a letter from John Pawson from Liverpool dated August 16th. Pawson listed four "particulars which you should seriously consider":

1st, our.....continuing united..... 2ndly, the avowed design of the Trustees is to divide us..
... 3rdly, the.....deeds of those Chapels.....
gives the Trustees a very improper degree of power..... 4thly, submit to those Trustees and
.....they will be as kind to you as the Trustees were to J. Atlay.¹

He advised Benson "to go to Bristol, according to your appointment" and to "act in consort" with the other preachers there, for "the leaders and the bulk of the people" are "on your side, and you will soon be able to raise a new Chapel".² In conclusion Pawson says:

But if you take part with the Trustees, then a division, both among the preachers and the people, must take place, and this will not only be the case at Bristol, but in several other places.³

However, Pawson soon changed his mind about Benson going to Bristol to fulfil his appointment. On August 24th, he journeyed to Manchester and "had a long conversation with him relative to his appointment"⁴, and Benson says, "he now dissuades me from going

¹This letter is quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.8, pp.122-23. The trustees of Dewsbury Chapel would not alter their deed, so the 1789 Conference resolved to erect an opposition chapel; the trustees accordingly engaged John Atlay, Wesley's book-steward, as their permanent preacher. Soon after a dispute arose between the trustees and Atlay and the latter was forced to leave Dewsbury.

²Pawson refers to a letter from Henry Moore giving him an account of the dispute. No doubt Moore had explained the plans for this "new chapel" to him.

³Ibid.

⁴Treffry, p.187.

to Bristol".¹ Soon after, Benson consulted Alexander Mather who advised him to go. On August 27th Mather wrote Benson saying:

'You are determined not to go unless I go with you', so I am determined not to go, except Mr. Pawson accompany me. To this he has agreed..... Our present purpose is to meet at Leeds, on Monday (i.e. Sept.1st), and come in the Mail to Manchester, on Tuesday, set off for Birmingham on Wednesday, get into Bristol on Friday night. To Mr. Thompson we have also agreed to write by this post, to meet us there. ... As you are aware, the nature of our Constitution (if we have such) admits of no interference in another District. Should any demur of this sort arise when we come there, you must base us harmless; as invited by you. Yea, compelled to come by your intreaties.²

In the meanwhile, Benson had been pondering the measures which he would take upon his arrival in Bristol. Believing that the Room trustees had taken an unwarranted step in expelling Henry Moore,

¹Quoted in Ibid. Pawson was intimately connected with the cause of Henry Moore. On the one hand he was a distinguished member of the Sacramentarian party. J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of C. Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol.68, p.214, says that Pawson began administering the Sacrament in 1791; a letter written by Pawson on April 14th, 1792, quoted in Blanshard, Life of S. Bradburn, p.150, indicates that he took part in an ordination ceremony. George Smith, II, p.99, says that Pawson sanctioned the "Bishops Plan" at the Lichfield meeting of April, 1794. Another letter from Pawson to C. Atmore, quoted in Stamp, "Memoirs of C. Atmore", p.314, indicates that Pawson desired that the 1794 Conference grant the Sacrament wherever the majority of the people want it. On the other hand Pawson had a special interest in the affairs of Portland Chapel, because, according to Charles Gardner, History of Portland Chapel, p.9, Pawson was one of the eleven preachers who met in 1791 to plan the erection of this chapel.

²Quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.8, pp.122-23. According to a MS. letter of S. Bradburn dated Sept.13th, 1794, this journey never materialised because it "was likely to be a fruitless attempt".

he had no thought of justifying them.¹ During the late Conference sitting, he had been the guest of one of the trustees², and all of them had requested that he be appointed to Bristol.³ And since he commanded their respect, he felt that he could influence them. Moreover, he "had no conception, that when the matters should be properly explained to them, the Trustees would wish to claim any such power as that of appointing Preachers".⁴ In addition, Benson feared that if he did not persuade them to revoke their notice to Moore, their chapels might "be occupied by Preachers not in our Connexion".⁵

The debts of Methodism were mounting, and Bristol in particular was not in a position to erect two new chapels to replace the old ones. In 1793, the missionary enterprise of the Connexion was in financial straits⁶, while the debts for new chapels were so great that Conference imposed special restrictions for the erection of future chapels.⁷ At the 1794 sitting, fifty-five of the one hundred and thirty-nine preachers' wives were unable to be provided

¹Benson's postscript attached to the Room trustees' Circular of Sept. 9th, 1794.

²Benson, Rodde and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

³Treffry, p. 184.

⁴Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

⁵Benson's postscript to the Circular of Sept. 9th, 1794.

⁶Minutes of Conference, I, p. 278.

⁷Ibid., pp. 276-77.

for¹; ^{OVER AND} above this, Conference faced a deficit of nearly £600.² A MS. letter written by Thomas Coke in behalf of the Conference to Mrs. Charles Wesley dated July 31st, 1794, states that Conference had borrowed £1,000 in order to pay her the £2,000 granted to her by John Wesley in his will.³ Indeed, this already acute financial situation was shortly to develop into a crisis.⁴

But over and beyond the financial burden which would be entailed if the Room and Guinea Street Chapels were lost to the Connexion, Benson thought it was his "duty to preserve them if possible to the Methodist Conference, together with the people who worship in them."⁵ He was confident that this could be accomplished because the trustees and the people who support them "are firmly attached to the Old Plan of Methodism, as to be determined not to separate with those whom they consider as making Innovations".⁶

Therefore Benson says that his:

first plan, in order thereto, was to preach alternately in all the Chapels, and without intermeddling with or mentioning the dispute at all, to call the minds of both parties to what is of infinitely more moment, than any or all the matters in debate between them.⁷

¹Ibid., pp. 289-91.

²Ibid., p. 294.

³Ministers, III:36 (located in Book Room in London).

⁴The Minutes of Conference, II, p. 40, records an address to the Methodist Societies "on the present distressed state of our Finances". This year, 1799, the deficit published was £1,900.

⁵Benson's postscript to the Circular of Sept. 9th, 1794.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

He explained this plan to the friends he met during his journey to Bristol and "had the satisfaction of finding it approved by all to whom he mentioned it".¹ But upon his arrival in Birmingham:

it occurred to his mind that as he had lodged, during the Conference, at the house of one of the Trustees, and had frequently visited several of them, they being his old friends, that if he should preach first at the Room, or at Guinea-Street Chapel, it might make those Leaders, Stewards and people who had withdrawn from those Chapels, jealous of him, and to suspect that he was partial to the Trustees. He therefore, after advising with a judicious friend, judged it best to make the first offer of his services to the people that worshipped in Portland Chapel, and accordingly wrote to Mr. Ewer, that he hoped to be in Bristol on the Wednesday (i.e. Sept. 3rd) following, and if there were no objection would preach that night in that Chapel.²

Arriving in Gloucester on September 2nd, Benson found several important letters awaiting him at the house of Mr. Connybear, the iron-monger. One of the letters, written by Benjamin Rhodes and dated September 1st, says:

This is one of the most critical times that you have yet known, and humanly speaking much depends on what side you take. I confess in this affair I see no medium for you to take. Matters are come to their full crisis, and a separation has taken place; both sides are fixed, firm and resolv'd. The Trustees so understand it: and have prepared for it, by subscribing for a fund, to carry on their cause, and by preparing a supply of preachers, of whom they say they have plenty, and that Mr. Benson is their man! I hope not.

.....It is not the new plan, not the old plan. But who shall appoint preachers? Who shall govern the Methodist connection? The Trustees? or the Conference?

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

Can you, my Brother, submit on any consideration, to renounce your brethren, and be a Trustee man? The division of this society is nothing (indeed so few of them are on the side of the Trustees, that it is not worth calling a division). But the dividing of the preachers, pains me to the heart; Nor wou'd the loss of any preacher in the connection give more pain, than the loss of my friend and Brother Benson. In this place, God appears to take part with those that declare for the Conference - so many doors appear to be providentially opened, and such amazing congregations in every place.

I have committed all to God, and act, I am sure, from the purest of motives.¹

A second letter was in the handwriting of Thomas Coke and was signed by Coke, Moore, Thomas Rutherford, Benjamin Rhodes, Jonathan Crowther, and John Grant. This letter declared that:

unless he unequivocally assured the Trustees of Portland Chapel, that he would not preach at the Room or at Guinea-Street Chapel, they could not admit me into their's! Nay and that they could not admit him till he had given them that assurance under his own hand.²

With the exception of Moore all of the above preachers had been stationed in other circuits. Coke and Rutherford were both stationed in London under the superintendency of William Thompson; the latter was well acquainted with the situation in Bristol having served there during the turbulent years of 1791 to 1793. Rhodes was appointed to the Birmingham circuit this year, while Crowther, the uncle of the historian of the same name³, was listed for the West Indies. Since no convoy was leaving at this time to that place,

¹MS. letter found in Methodist Preachers, V:53.

²This information is found in Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

³"The Methodist 'Plan of Pacification', 1791-1795", p. 21.

Coke, who presided over the Methodist mission work, had requested that Crowther remain in Bristol to support Moore.¹ The remaining preacher, John Grant, was assigned to the Redruth circuit.

All of these preachers, with the exception of Crowther, were attached to the Sacramentarian cause², while the first four had been instrumental in the erection of Portland Chapel.³ Although both of these reasons help to knit the six preachers together, the chief incentive behind their unity was a common fear of trustee power. This is obvious from Rhodes' previously quoted letter to Benson dated September 1st, and also from a November 10th, 1794, publication of Crowther which says:

The ground upon which I have been enduced to take any part.....in this affair is, a firm persuasion that there was a combination of Trustees formed against the liberty and independence of the Preachers.⁴

Elsewhere in the same publication, Crowther declares that the people of Portland Chapel "saw, the time was at last come, for open, united, and manly resistance" to the Room trustees.⁵ And, he

¹J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", p.7.

²Crowther, Ibid., p.5, says "I never gave the Sacrament..... in my life, and I do not feel the least inclination to do it". Little is known of J. Grant except that, according to Joseph Hall, Memorials of Wesleyan Methodist Ministers. London, Haughton and Co., 1876, p.64, at the age of 20 in 1790 he became a Methodist itinerant. He entered full connexion in 1793. It is likely that his sacramental views coincided with the other preachers.

³See Gardner, History of Portland Chapel, p.9. On p.10 Gardner says "the first internment (i.e. at Portland) was that of a child of the Rev. Thomas Rutherford".

⁴Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", Nov.10th, 1794, p.5.

⁵Ibid., p.20.

continues:

The same considerations had some weight with the Preachers who took part against the Trustees. But the persuasion of a formidable combination of Trustees - that the Bristol Trustees had a principal hand in forming that combination - and that if firm and effectual resistance was not made to this step, we might expect the same, or occurrences more grievous, in other parts of the land, was what weighed most with them. I avow before God and the world, that these were my ideas and motives, and I believe they were those of my Brethren.¹

A third letter² which Benson received at Gloucester was written by James Ewer³ in behalf of the Portland trustees, but Ewer's letter merely confirmed the letter of the six preachers. There was also awaiting him the circular of the Room trustees which had been printed on August 30th. Regarding this circular, Benson says:

The Trustees came forward and declared, in a printed Letter, that they had no intention, nor desire to take the appointment of Preachers out of the hands of Conference, even for Broadmead and Guinea-Street Chapels, and much less for the whole Circuit.⁴

Upon receipt of these three letters and one circular Benson found himself in an awkward situation. He had purposed "to preach alternately in all the Chapels", "without intermeddling with or

¹Ibid., pp. 20-21.

²Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

³On August 20th the Minutes of King Street Chapel record that Ewer was elected treasurer of the building committee.

⁴Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

mentioning the dispute at all". However he now seemed to face the dilemma of siding with one party or the other. And he could hardly accept the conditions declared in the letters of the six preachers and Mr. Ewer without entirely abandoning his hope "to call the minds of both parties to what is of infinitely more moment, than any or all the matters in debate between them" and restore peace.

The situation in Bristol appeared even more perplexing than he had anticipated. On the one hand the three letters from the Portland party clearly indicated the authors' desire to defend Conference authority against the encroachments of chapel trustees; yet, on the other hand, the Room trustees had maintained in their circular that they "had no intention" of defying Conference authority. Although it was obvious that the action of the Room trustees, regardless of their "intention", was a threat to Conference authority, there were other factors regarding the Portland party which Benson viewed with equal suspicion.

In the first place he had received two letters warning him that he would not be permitted in Portland's pulpit unless he gave a written testimony that he would not preach in the two chapels of the Room trustees. Moreover, the fact that the letters were directed to the Bristol superintendent and that one of the letters was signed by five preachers, appointed to other circuits and having no jurisdiction in Bristol, renders the situation acute. It will be recalled that Alexander Mather, in his letter to Benson dated August 27th, said: "As you are aware, the nature of our Constitution

admits of no interference in another District".

In addition to this, the Portland party, contrary to the rules of Conference¹, had begun erecting an opposition chapel. Benson says:

The Conference has enjoined that no step shall be taken towards building new Preaching-Houses, but where they are appointed by Conference or at least approved by a District Meeting, but here without any such authority, nay without so much as consulting the Assistant, ground has been bought in two places, engagements entered into, and building actually begun at one of them.²

But perhaps most important of all, it was inevitable that Benson would see the striking similarity between the threat of expulsion he was now receiving and the one sent to Henry Moore. While the latter had been threatened with expulsion from the Room if he should administer the Sacrament at Portland where Conference had appointed him to do so, Benson was being threatened with expulsion from Portland if he should preach at the Room where Conference had appointed him to do so.

However, Benson still manifested his willingness to disregard the anti-Conference actions of both sides for the sake of a reconciliation. He says that since "the point.....was not whether the people should enjoy their Christian privilege, but who should appoint Preachers, the Trustees or the Conference", the dispute

¹Minutes of Conference, I, pp. 276-77.

²Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept. 26th, 1794.

has "entirely changed", and "on this fresh bottom, both parties might yet meet".¹

Shortly after his arrival in Bristol on Wednesday, September 3rd², he was given a letter from the Portland trustees that reiterated the conditions specified in Mr. Ewer's letter. This letter, which again threatened Benson with expulsion, ironically declared that "The question was not now, between Portland Chapel and the Trustees of the Room.....but who should appoint the Preachers.....the Trustees or the Conference".³

Benson says that he:

took the earliest opportunity of conversing with them (i.e. the Room trustees) on the subject and afterwards drew up and offered to their consideration, certain proposals, which he thought might at least afford a basis on which the parties might meet to consider and settle more fully the terms of reconciliation between them.⁴

With this initial success he approached the Portland trustees with the proposals that the Room trustees had agreed upon. But the proposals were not satisfactory to them, and they urged, "Let them give us assurance of this by a legal instrument, and we will be satisfied".⁵ Therefore the condition for reconciliation was to

¹Ibid.

²Macdonald, p. 271.

³Circular of September 26th, 1794.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

be based upon the Room trustees altering their deed so that Conference alone would have the right to appoint preachers there.

With this in view, Benson again conferred with the Room trustees, and, he says, "They were at length prevailed upon to agree even to this.....and by so doing as was hoped, to remove every cause of dispute".¹ However, much to Benson's surprise, the Portland trustees, led by Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, refused even this concession. Benson remarks: "The war, however, must still be prosecuted on some ground, but on what.....we do not know".²

The Room trustees had been persuaded by Benson to go to the extreme in their concessions, and it appears unusual, even astonishing, that their offer to alter their deed was rejected. To the Portland party, however, there were two important reasons why they were unwilling to accept even this concession and thus an immediate reconciliation. The first was their fear of trustees in general and their determination to set an example in Bristol; the second reason was their financial commitments.

Why did the Portland party feel such apprehension over trustees? It has been shown that Chapel trustees, in their opposition to the sacramental innovations, accused the Sacramentarians of abandoning the "Old Plan" by threatening the Church relation. After that, these trustees resisted the 1793 Conference sacramental resolution and the Sacramentarians charged the trustees of the same

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

thing on the grounds of their threat to Conference authority. The charge against the trustees had become acute after they had organised in London and had sent delegates to resist a further concession by the 1794 Conference. And it had been in the context of this situation that the Room trustees expelled Moore; a threat had become open defiance. Thus the Portland party was fearful of what other trustees might attempt.

Now it is noteworthy, as it might be expected, that both sides were more engrossed in the negative sides of the two issues than in the positive principles concerned. For instance, the trustees, although they claimed that their motivation was a loyalty to the "Old Plan" and that their policy was to preserve the Church relation, the Minutes of Conference declare that some of the most avid denouncers of the sacramental innovation "with all their pretended zeal for the Church of England, have taken seats in dissenting meeting-houses".¹ Again, John Pawson writes:

It is a rather curious thing to see the Trustees of so many places, Fully resolved to abide by the old plan, who we very well know have constant preaching in Church-hours. Such as Birmingham, Sheffield, Bullock-Smithy, Newmills, Eccleshal, Tunstall.²

Thus the trustees came to be more involved in resisting the sacramental innovation than in preserving the "Old Plan" or the

¹Minutes of Conference, I, p.281.

²J. Pawson, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies", Jan.20th, 1795, p.24.

Church relation; the latter subject came to be exploited in order to solicit support from the Methodist people.

The same is also true of the Portland party. It appears that the preachers united under Coke and Moore considered that Bristol was symptomatic of a general struggle between trustees and preachers. Like the trustees, they proclaimed their policy to be one of defending Conference authority when in reality their primary concern was to check the growing power of the trustees. Hence, they disregarded Conference regulations by interfering in a circuit where they had not been appointed, resolving to build an unauthorised chapel, and threatening Benson with expulsion if he should preach in the chapels of the Room trustees. Their intention was to check trustee power; the particular matters in dispute at Bristol were relevant only in so far as this end could be achieved. Bristol was meant to be a show down with trustees, and the defeat of the Room trustees was meant to be an example to all trustees. Since the only instrument in the hands of trustees was that of denying their chapels to preachers, it was necessary that Moore's expulsion by the Room trustees remain in the focal point. Consequently, the concessions of the Room trustees were rejected; the time was not yet ripe for a settlement.

A second reason for rejecting the proposals of reconciliation lay in the financial commitments of the Portland party. Early in 1792, the Portland trustees borrowed £105¹, which debt was increased

¹Portland Chapel Cash Book: 1791-1856. (MS. located in Portland Chapel).

in March, 1793, by an additional loan of £1,000 at 5% interest.¹ Two months later, another loan brought the debt to £1,305.² According to Portland's account book, £1,200 of this was owed to Mr. George May; the debt persisted until 1811, after which time there is no mention of it in the book.

But if Portland Chapel was in financial straits, the plans to erect two new chapels occasioned much higher debts. It has been noted that the building committee for King Street Chapel, consisting primarily of Portland trustees, met on August 20th and resolved that subscriptions for a chapel near Guinea Street were to be opened when £1,000 had been collected for the first chapel. Mather's circular of October 27th declares that £382 : 5/- had already been paid for ground near Guinea Street.³ On August 23rd the property purchased on King Street was conveyed to Coke who agreed to spend £2,500 on the erection of a chapel at this location.⁴ Then on September 3rd, the day Benson arrived in Bristol, the building committee met at the house of Mr. Tucker⁵, and the minutes of this meeting, signed by Coke, Moore and Rutherford, state:

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Mather's Circular of October 27th, 1794, p.2.

⁴MS. Minutes of King Street Chapel.

⁵Mr. Tucker, a leader at Portland Chapel, was the carpenter selected to supervise the building of King Street Chapel.

An advance of £200 per month is to be made to Mr. Tucker, the first advance to be made on the first Wednesday in October, and the other on the first Wednesday in each month.¹

Therefore, prior to Benson's arrival in Bristol and in the face of Portland Chapel's debt of over £1,300, the Portland party had committed itself to a sum well over £4,200.² But even at this, the amount was underestimated, because, according to the minutes of King Street Chapel dated November, 1795, £3,364 was owed for King Street Chapel alone. The significance of these figures can best be evaluated from the fact that the 1799 Conference sent an address to the Methodist societies regarding "the present distressed state of our Finances" when it faced a deficit of only £1,900.³

After being in Bristol for a few weeks and becoming aware of the extent of these debts, Benson himself arrived at the conclusion that financial commitments were partly responsible for the Portland party refusing the concession and an early peace.⁴ The evidence above strongly supports this. For in the light of these debts and commitments, if a reconciliation had come immediately, then the opportunity of appealing to the Connexion for funds to erect an

¹Minutes of King Street Chapel.

²This includes £1,300 for Portland Chapel, £2,500 for King Street Chapel and £382 for property on Guinea Street. The cost of the land on King Street is not known, but it would add to these figures.

³Minutes of Conference, II, pp. 40-41.

⁴Circular of September 26th, 1794.

opposition chapel would have vanished. This would have left the Portland trustees, and particularly Thomas Coke, with the debts of Portland Chapel, the new chapel, as well as the property on both Guinea Street and King Street. And so it was virtually impossible for the Portland party to accept any proposals which would have resulted in an early settlement. Adequate funds were not available in Bristol; the financial support of the whole Connexion was necessary.

Thus, despite Benson's efforts to pacify the Portland party, the warning that he would be expelled from Portland if he should preach for the Room trustees remained. As it has been seen, the deed of the latter trustees gave them the right to reject a preacher, but the former chapel's deed permitted its trustees no such power. Portland's deed of July 25th, 1794, stipulates:

.....for 10/- Geo. May and Henry Davis grant to 19 Trustees land and Portland Chapel to hold to the use of them there &c. Upon trust for the preachers appointed by the Conference except such as the Superintendent together with a majority of the Trustees shall appoint.¹

Though there is no provision which allows the trustees to refuse a preacher appointed by Conference, there is, ironically, the provision that the "Superintendent (which was in this case Benson) together with a majority of the Trustees" may appoint a preacher. Consequently, if the Portland trustees expelled Benson, they would be violating

¹This deed is located in the Methodist Church Department for Chapel Affairs at Manchester.

their own deed as well as Conference authority. Benson comments:

For here a Chapel, said to be settled fully on the Conference plan, is shut against the Assistant appointed by Conference for the Circuit, and that without any crime or fault of any kind, either committed by him or alledged to him, Shut against him merely because he will not promise so to attach himself to one party, as to neglect his duty to the other, but wishes, to the uttermost of his power, to serve both in love.¹

What motivated the Portland party to maintain this position regarding Benson? Jonathan Crowther, at a later date, attempts to explain what "conditions.....determined the trustees of Portland-Chapel not to suffer Mr. Benson.....to preach in their Chapel".² He says:

Mr. Benson and his Helpers being known to be attached to the Trustees of the Room, and warm advocates for them and that they still adhered to them although they had renounced the authority of the Conference - to admit them into Portland-Chapel, would be unfaithfulness to the Conference.³

However, on the same page of his pamphlet, Crowther himself refutes this argument by saying:

Probably it will here be said that Mr. Benson &c. were willing to preach to the chief part of the Society at Portland-Chapel, but that the Trustees of that Chapel opposed their preaching there. This I know is the strong hold of argumentation on Mr. Benson's side of the question.⁴

Continuing his arguments, Crowther contends:

¹Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of September 26th, 1794.

²J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", p.11.

³Ibid., p.10.

⁴Ibid.

Another argument was, that from Mr. Benson's letters, &c. on the subject, it was evident that he would avail himself of his admission there to promote the designs of the Trustees, and that he would exert his popular talents to the uttermost in doing this.¹

This latter "argument" of Crowther hints at the real motive behind the proposition offered to Benson. The two key phrases are "from Mr. Benson's letters, &c. on the subject, it was evident that he would avail himself of his admission there to promote the designs" and "that he would exert his popular talents to the uttermost in doing this". The former quotation reveals the Portland party's awareness of Benson's intention to restore peace and to persuade the Portland congregation to abandon the dispute, while the latter quotation exhibits their fear of Benson's ability to execute his "designs". And Benson was certainly famed for his ability to persuade preachers and people alike.² And so in the light of the previous discussion

¹Ibid.

²J. Crowther, "The Crisis of Methodism", Jan. 21st, 1795, pp. 11-12, says, "if any person could have influenced them (i.e. the preachers united under Moore) to sacrifice their judgments, and what they believed to be an important cause, Mr. Benson would have done it as soon as any other". James Everett, Wesleyan Takings or Centenary Sketches of Ministerial Character, London, Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1840, p. 223, says that Benson "smote his hearers, and seemed to deprive them of the power of reflection". J. Everett, Adam Clarke Portrayed, London, Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1843, p. 5, quotes Robert Hall as saying, "Sir, Mr. Benson is irresistible - absolutely irresistible". The writer of an article in the Methodist Magazine, 1862, Vol. 85, p. 152, drawing his information from Jabez Bunting, compares Benson to Richard Baxter; while another writer of an article in the Methodist Magazine, 1836, Vol. 59, p. 847, quotes a contemporary source as saying, "He seems like a messenger sent from the other world to call men to account". For additional information on Benson's power as a speaker, see Methodist Magazine: Vol. 51, p. 38; Vol. 53, p. 24; Vol. 60, pp. 90-91; and Vol. 68, p. 332. See also Macdonald, p. 455; Thompson, Early Chapters in Hull Methodism, p. 40; Stevenson, City-Road Chapel, p. 188; and T. P. Bunting, The Life of Jabez Bunting, London, T. Woolmer, 1887, I, pp. 29-31.

regarding the difficulties which an immediate peace would offer to the Portland party, their condition to Benson, and it was essentially meant as a "condition" rather than a "warning", is reasonable. If Benson were willing to promise not to preach for the Room trustees, such a promise implied, at least, an abandonment of his "designs" to restore peace if not a support for the Portland cause. Then his presence in Portland's pulpit would present no danger. However, if Benson refused to make such a promise and yet was given access to Portland, "it was evident that he would avail himself of his admission there to promote the designs" he had for peace and "that he would exert his popular talents to the uttermost in doing this". And if, which was not unlikely, Benson was successful in persuading the Portland congregation to abandon the dispute, the situation would degenerate into a controversy merely between a few preachers and trustees. No, Methodist opinion throughout the Connexion had to support Coke and Moore in their opposition chapel and in their cause against trustees if they were to have success, and the statistics of thirteen hundred circuit members supporting Moore with only three hundred behind the Room trustees were vital for soliciting this support. While Benson's active support was not necessary for their plan, it was all-important that he did not interfere or attempt to thwart it from Portland's pulpit. Thus Benson had to agree not to preach for the Room trustees or else be expelled from Portland.

After his strenuous efforts to restore peace had failed, the

dilemma of Benson's decision was even more salient. If the Room trustees had blunted the effect of their action against Moore by their readiness to make concessions, then the Portland party had sharpened the effect of its illegal activities by rejecting these concessions. Indeed, Benson, as he declares, could see no reason at the time why the Room trustees' offer to alter their deed was refused. And so, being unable to sanction either party in Bristol and being unable to understand the adamant attitude of the Portland party, Benson says:

Mr. Benson finding that he could not, without violent measures.....gain admission into Portland Chapel; and finding that prejudice had taken such effectual hold on the hearts of the leading persons that worship there, that he could have no access to them at all in the way of preaching, unless he entirely abandoned the other Chapels and the large and respectable Congregations that regularly assembled in them, which he did not think himself at liberty to do, had recourse to another expedient.¹

This "expedient" for Benson was simply to abide by his own Conference appointment and preach, as he had originally planned, in all of the Bristol chapels whose doors were open to him.

Although it was inevitable that the dispute with the Room trustees would be perpetuated, nevertheless the entire scene was altered by Benson's stand. If it had been anticipated that the trustees, being without a preacher, would either lose their

¹Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of September 26th, 1794.

congregations or engage a preacher from outside the Connexion, in either eventuality exhibiting a singular example of the defeat of trustee power, then this was frustrated by Benson's decision to supply their chapels. On the other hand, if Benson himself hoped for an early settlement, his decision instead was to add strength to the Room party and to perpetuate the struggle in Bristol which in turn was to rapidly spread into a Connexional crisis. The interaction of Benson's personal prestige and his expulsion from Portland provided the opportunity for trustees to organise on a grand scale and at the same time occasioned the greatest breach among the preachers hitherto known in Methodism.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two Bristol Circuits

The forecast of the Connexional breach to come was seen in the division among the preachers in Bristol during the first few weeks after the flare-up. Of the four preachers appointed to the Bristol circuit, two of them, Thomas Vasey and Richard Rodda, had reserved their stand in the dispute until Benson should arrive. Henry Moore says of Vasey:

Mr. Vasey has seemed throughout this business to act with timidity, and had he been left to himself, perhaps would not have behaved thus.¹

Rodda, who was also reluctant to sanction either of the opposing parties, chose to follow Benson's leadership. He writes:

During the remainder of this year while Mr. Vasey and I remained with Mr. Benson, Mr. Moore called in the assistance of two or three Preachers whom the Conference had appointed to other Circuits.... thus all rule and government were trampled under foot. The parties, under their different leaders, went by the names of 'the Old' and 'the New, Methodists'. I thought some, in each, ran to extremes, and went beyond that middle path in which I was desirous of walking.²

The preachers split with Rodda and Vasey supporting Benson while Coke, Rhodes, Crowther and Grant supported Moore. The former, known as the "Old Methodists", occupied the Room, Guinea

¹H. Moore, Circular of Sept.13th, 1794.

²Rodda's Journal, quoted by J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of C. Atmore", Methodist Magazine, 1845, Vol.68, p.322.

Street, and Keysham Chapels¹, and the latter, known as the "New Methodists", supplied Portland, Castle Green², and later Kingswood Chapels. Some "New Methodist" trustees describe the preachers who led the "Old Methodists":

Mr. Benson's name is precious to us as a Minister of the Gospel. His abilities and usefullness have been praised in all the Churches.³

There is nothing remarkable in the character of Mr. Rodda, either as a Christian, or Minister of the gospel. We have a specimen of his ability to preach, in the Sermons he has published. It is little singular, that a man with his talent, should have the happy art of fixing himself in our best circuits as he has done, for so many years.⁴

How the double Rev. Thomas Vasey became a Methodist Preacher, is a mystery to many. His abilities, after so many years of study and regular preaching, are far from rendering him acceptable to our people in general. But his unsteadiness in the work has been particularly notorious.⁵

It is interesting that they praise Benson, and the contrast of this praise with the sarcastic attack on Rodda and Vasey emphasises their respect for Benson's dedication. This suggests a rapport between Benson and the Portland party which helps to explain why Benson could still hope to act as a mediator.

¹Treffry, p.191.

²D. Male, "A Short History of Old King Street.....", p.6.

³"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General", p.8.

⁴Ibid., p.10.

⁵Ibid., p.11.

Events moved swiftly after Benson arrived. The very next day he appointed Rodda to hold the service at Kingswood Chapel, a few miles east of Bristol. Mary Blacker's Journal narrates the incident which occurred:

Dr. Coke went to preach at Kingswood and found Mr. Vasey.....in.....the pulpit, upon which he took his stand under one of the trees and began services. This was more than some of the zealous colliers could endure. Mr. Rodda having announced the hymn beginning, "come on, my partners in distress", some of them remarked in an unmistakable tone, 'he's no partner of ours', and declared that they would not allow 'that dear little man to stand out of doors with his hair blowing about in the wind' and suiting the action to the word they carried the Doctor to the pulpit and displaced Mr. Rodda.¹

The next day the Room trustees sent the following notice to be posted on the door of Kingswood Chapel:

We the undersigned, being the Legal Trustees of the Methodist Chapel in Kingswood.....are informed that Persons not appointed by the Conference for this Circuit, are attempting to get Possession of the Pulpit and to exclude the Preachers whom the Conference have appointed. We therefore send you this Notice, that Mr. Benson, Mr. Rodda, and Mr. Vasey are the Preachers appointed by the Conference.....and which appointments we confirm. Therefore no other Persons have any Right to preach in Kingswood or Bristol Chapels but such as Mr. Benson the Assistant, may think proper to permit, till the meeting of the next Conference; it being always the Assistant's province to manage that Business.²

But despite the incident at Kingswood on September 4th, when Rodda was pushed out, and despite the fact that Henry Moore formally

¹Quoted in J.R. Gregory, "Notes from an Old Methodist Journal", p. 68.

²Room trustees' Circular of September 9th, 1794.

laid the foundation stone for the opposition chapel on September 5th¹, both incidents emphasising the widening breach, Benson gave Benjamin Rhodes permission to hold the September 7th Sunday morning service at Kingswood. He had hoped by doing this to improve relations and pave the way for peace, but the events that occurred on this Sunday revealed the futility of such a hope. For Rhodes, preaching at Kingswood, took the opportunity to denounce the Room trustees and accuse Benson of supporting them; and Coke and Moore began preaching outside Guinea Street Chapel where Benson was conducting the morning service.² That evening

Mr. Benson, hearing of the confusion, went over with a view to quiet the peoples minds, and do his duty as an Assistant in meeting the Society, Stewards and Leaders, and having previously, for the sake of peace, permitted Mr. Rhodes to preach in the morning, he was opposed in the face of the whole congregation by Mr. Rhodes in a way not very becoming, in one who was appointed for another Circuit, and had no right to appear in that pulpit but by Mr. Benson's permission.³

And "on the same day Mr. Vasey met with similar treatment from Mr. Grant at Winterbourn".⁴ The bitterness between the opposing parties in Bristol was increasing, and the thought of reconciliation was becoming impossible.

¹Minutes of King Street Chapel.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended", p.33.

³Room Trustees' Circular of September 9th, 1794.

⁴Ibid.

Three circulars appeared during the week which proceeded the disturbances on September 7th. Excerpts from these circulars reveal some of the arguments employed by the two parties and illustrate the tortuous avenues of logic they travelled while trying to justify their actions. The first is an address to the Connexion, published by the Room trustees on September 9th, denying the charges made against them.

We sincerely desire that the Preachers may continue to be united, in one body.And as to the appointment of Preachers, we are well convinced that it is necessary, in order to preserve the Itinerant Plan, that this should remain with the Conference; and we have not taken,¹ nor do we wish to take it out of their hands.

The trustees then turn their attention to the Portland party and list their grievances against them. Special emphasis is given to the expulsion of Benson, Rodda and Vasey from Portland Chapel and the building of an opposition chapel. Finally, the trustees, after expressing their opinion that "the Lord's Supper should not be introduced where the people are not unanimous in desiring it, or where it will make a division in the Societies", conclude with the words:

You see by all this brethren, we are not opposed to Conference: but we are opposed to these men that break at pleasure every rule of Conference.²

Benson, Rodda and Vasey attached a letter to the above circular declaring:

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

.....we do not take upon us to justify the step which the above-named Trustees took in denying Mr. Moore the pulpit.....we wish they had not taken that step.....because.....it, has involved us in..... great difficulties; yet.....every rule of Conference trampled under foot by some who pretend great zeal for the authority of Conference, obliges us to bear our testimony..... We are not accused of anything but preaching.....in which chapels.....we were appointed by Conference to preach, and which if we had abandoned, and thereby suffered them to be occupied by Preachers not in our Connexion. We judged it.....our duty to preserve them.....to the Methodist Conference, together with the people who worship in them, and who are so firmly attached to the Old Plan of Methodism, as to be determined not to separate with those whom they consider as making Innovations.

On September 13th, Henry Moore sent a reply to the trustees' circular. He says:

Perhaps they do not now desire to divide the Preachers. They see that they cannot..... But many.....can fully testify that they did design it, and were fully bent on effecting it.

Regarding Benson, Moore observes:

Perhaps Mr. Benson does regret this rash step. (i.e. of the trustees) I am inclined to think it contrary to his mind, and I am the more astonished that he should support those who acted thus.

But, he continues:

Mr. Benson chose nevertheless, to preach for the Trustees of the Room &c. The Trustees of Portland Chapel therefore determined to hold the Chapel for the Conference, and to abide by its decision. They also think it would be very imprudent in them, who are sureties for a very large debt, to permit those to preach, who would inevitably scatter the congregation; the People having declared, that if any of those men should attempt ¹ to preach, they would immediately leave the Chapel.

¹H. Moore, Circular of September 13th, 1794.

Another circular, signed "A Private Member of the Methodist Society", was published in reply to the Room trustees' circular of September 9th. The following quotation from this letter reveals its tone:

It is not merely our receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or attending our own ministry in Church hours. No; a stronger bias rules. Love of command, and fearful apprehensions of descending from the seat of power, have been the principles of your action.....¹

The split in Bristol had become solidified, with each party carrying on its separate activities as though there were two Bristol circuits. However, the Portland party, which had from the beginning claimed to be the champions of Conference, was beginning to feel the embarrassment occasioned by its illegal actions. Samuel Bradburn writes, "Nothing is legal with us 'till it is confirmed by a District Meeting'".² Accordingly, Bradburn who was chairman of the Bristol District, sent letters to the various preachers stationed in the five circuits that comprised this district summoning a meeting. The following is one of these letters, dated September 9th, written by him to Timothy Crowther in the Taunton circuit:

The alarming situation of our affairs in Bristol requires our immediate attention. Mr. Benson is arrived, but is rejected by the greatest part of the society, unless he will abide by the

¹"A Reply to a Printed Hand-Bill now in Circulation by the Trustees of Two of the Methodist-Chapels in Bristol". Bristol, 1794.

²MS. letter to T. Crowther, dated September 9th, 1794, which is located in the London Book Room Archives.

Conference. It appears that he has no design to leave us; but he is critically situated on account of his connexion with the old Trustees. Nothing is legal with us 'till it is confirmed by a District Meeting'. Such a meeting is now absolutely necessary in Bristol: and I am ordered officially to summon every preacher in this District to be in Bristol on Monday Evening next, (the fifteenth instant) that we may begin our meeting on Tuesday morning the 16th at nine oclock in Portland Chapel, the only proper Methodist Chapel now in Bristol. As this meeting is of great importance, I hope you and your colleagues will attend without fail, if God permit. Please to go to Mr. Hunts, Taylor Union H. where you will all be furnished with all you want for yourselves and horses, as we have no longer anything to do with the room. Please let your Brethren know in time.¹

The District Meeting opened on September 16th at Portland Chapel. At least twenty-four preachers, fourteen of whom were members of the Legal Hundred², were present. Although the regulations called for only five preachers to serve on the official committee³, fifteen of the seventeen preachers stationed in the district came to the meeting and officially served on the committee.⁴

¹ Ibid.

² The Legal Hundred was the official Conference originated by Wesley's Deed of Declaration of 1784.

³ Minutes of Conference, I, p.277. (i.e. four preachers and a chairman.)

⁴ Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept.26th, 1794, indicates that twelve preachers expelled them. Since Bradburn, Moore, Benson, Rodda and Vasey must have been present, ten of the following twelve preachers stationed in the district (consisting of the Bristol, Taunton, Shepton-Mallet, Bath and Gloucestershire circuits) must have sat on the committee: T. Crowther, J. Cricket, J. Stephens, C. Watkins, W. Ashman, J. Sutcliffe, R. Smith, R. Elliott, J. Broadbent, W. Jenkins, J. Burgess, and J. Dean. This would bring the total number to fifteen.

Eleven of these supported Moore. Before the meeting there had been a gradual shifting into position as preachers decided which side they supported, and by the time of the meeting the opposing ranks were distinct. Among the important preachers mainly from outside the district, who supported Moore's policy, were: Thomas Coke, Thomas Rutherford, Benjamin Rhodes, Jonathan Crowther, John Grant, Thomas Taylor¹, Samuel Bradburn, and Thomas Hanby, while those who endorsed Benson's policy were Richard Rodds, Thomas Vasey, Jeremiah Brettell, William Collins, William Thompson, Alexander Mather and John Pawson.² In these imposing ranks were an impressive array of the most important men in the Connexion, including eight of the first nine presidents of Conference. Because of the presence of so many influential leaders, the significance of the dispute was distilled and became more potent in its portent for the future.

¹Thomas Taylor, a distinguished member of the Sacramentarian party, was engaged in a dispute in 1791 at Liverpool by his efforts to introduce lay administration there. Ordained along with Bradburn in 1792, he again became engaged in a controversy at Liverpool for administering the Sacrament. The 1792 Conference reproved him for administering. Later in 1792 he published "A Defence of the Methodists who do not attend the National Church, but avail themselves of Liberty of Conscience", Liverpool, 1792. Later in 1794 he served as a member of the Lichfield meeting in favour of the "Bishops Plan". He was particularly involved in the Bristol crisis, having helped to plan Portland Chapel in 1791 (Gardner, p.9) and having assisted Coke along with Henry Moore with the Sacrament at Portland on the evening of August 10th, 1794.

²Mather and Pawson were not present, but their letter, containing their views, was read to the meeting.

The meeting began at 9 a.m. with Bradburn reading a letter which he had received from Alexander Mather and John Pawson. This letter recommended:

1st, That you use your endeavours to restore peace between yourselves and unity to the people.
 2nd, That the farther determination of this matter be referred to the decision of the Conference, to whom we think it properly belongs; it being our opinion that neither the conduct of the Trustees nor of the Brethren can be wholly vindicated, and that only the Conference can be judge in this very important affair. Therefore, we intreat that everything may be left as it is till they meet, as to building;¹ and that the Circuit may be as it was at Conference.

Following the reading of this letter, Benson arose and proposed:

That the Trustees of no chapel, ought to have power to refuse the Preachers the Conference.² appoints, or to place and displace Preachers.

Benson says of his proposal:

at the same time that it would have condemned the late step of the Trustees of Broadmead and Guinea Street Chapels, it went to incriminate the Trustees of Portland Chapel, in refusing us the pulpit.³

Because of this, Henry Moore expressed his disapproval, and "upon this motion a majority of the Members of the District Meeting put a negative".⁴ The session on this first day ended without any progress being made toward a settlement.

¹This letter, dated September 13th, 1794, is quoted in the Circular of Benson, Rodda and Vasey of September 26th, 1794.

²Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of September 26th, 1794.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

At the second sitting held on Wednesday, September 17th, Benson proposed a plan which he describes as the "propositions of the Trustees". He explains that "in drawing up these proposals, Mr. Benson did not consider, what propositions he would have wished the Trustees to make.....but what he had reason to think he could prevail on them to make".

1. All past things to be forgotten, and reproachful abusive expressions to be avoided on both sides, especially from the pulpit.
2. On condition, that Mr. Moore forbears to assist in the Administration of the Sacrament at Portland Chapel, the Trustees shall revoke the prohibition sent to him, respecting preaching in the Room, and Guinea-street Chapels.
3. That the Trustees shall engage to allow the appointment of Preachers for Bristol, as well as other parts of the kingdom, to remain with the Conference, and that they will receive the Preachers the Conference appoints, reserving themselves a negative only, in the cases of immorality, or of false doctrine, clearly proved to the satisfaction of the majority of the Trustees, Stewards, and Leaders, on condition, that no service shall be in Church-hours, or the Lord's Supper administered at the Room, or at Guinea-street Chapels, except by a Clergyman of the Church of England, and with the approbation of a majority of the Trustees; and that the Sacrament shall not be administered even at Portland Chapel, except by a Clergyman, at least till the Society are unanimous for its being administered by the Lay-Preachers.
4. In the case of Preachers should be hereafter so divided, that either there should be no Conference, or there should be two or more Conferences, that then the Trustees should be at full liberty to appoint Preachers to occupy their Chapels as their Deeds direct.
5. That these propositions are to be acceded to, on condition, that not only all past things are to be forgotten, but that all buildings are to cease, so as to bring all things back to the same ground on which they stood before the dispute begun.¹

¹Ibid.

But after a discussion of this plan, the majority rejected it.

Following this, William Thompson¹ addressed the meeting.

Benson describes the reception his ideas received:

Mr. Thompson.....was so continually interrupted by one and another, chiefly young Preachers..... for him we felt more than for ourselves, as he had come to the meeting, not by his own choice, but at our invitations, not to help us to justify the Trustees of the Room.....any more than those of Portland Chapel, who all appeared, both to him and us to have deviated from the line of conduct which, we think, ought to have been pursued in this business by lovers of peace, but to act as a Mediator between the parties, and to assist us to form some plan, on which we might hereafter proceed peaceable.²

Benson continues:

.....how many bitter expressions were thrown out, by one and another from time to time, especially by some who did not belong to the District, and had no right to be present at the Meeting but by permission. It is true Dr. Coke, in a penitent letter, addressed to Mr. Benson, 'asked him a thousand pardons' for some of those expressions, but this was not till the day after.³

Thompson, realising that his address was not obtaining a fair hearing, left the meeting and was followed by Benson, Rodda, Vasey and Jeremiah Brettell.⁴

The third session of the District Meeting opened on the

¹Thompson, this year superintendent of the London circuit, was the first man to be elected president of Conference after Wesley's death in 1791. He had been expressly chosen for this post because he was unattached to either of the reactionary parties.

²Circular of September 26th, 1794.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

afternoon of September 18th with William Thompson proposing:

As the District Meeting chuses to reject the proposals of the Trustees, respecting the Lord's Supper being administered by a Clergyman only, it is now proposed that Portland Chapel, with all that incline to worship there and all other places of the Bristol Circuit, where the people are of the same mind, be added to another Circuit, or made a separate Circuit; as they have no objection, in case that is done, to Lay-Preachers, or any others that chuse administering the Lord's Supper in that Chapel, whensoever, and as oftensoever as is judged proper or convenient.¹

But this proposal:

met with so much opposition.....and such a spirit was manifested, and such expressions used by one or two, that Mr. Thompson again withdrew, as he had done the day before in much grief of mind, on account of such proceedings. The Chairman observing this, followed him out into the yard, and begging him to overlook what had passed, said in the presence of Mr. Benson, and Mr. Collins, 'They shall agree to it (Viz. to the last mentioned proposal) or I will wash my hands of them.'²

The evening session of the third and final day's proceedings opened with Benson proposing:

If we could neither reconcile the parties, nor agree to divide the Circuit, or join Portland Chapel to another Circuit, the Preachers, at least, for the credit of religion, and in tenderness to the bleeding cause of God, should cease to oppose each other, in so violent and determined a manner, in every place in town and country.³

But, Benson says:

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

even this was not acceded to. We, indeed, if we pleased, might give up the whole Circuit to them, and forbear to preach any where; but, if we thought proper to preach at all, they were determined to oppose us.¹

Apparently the last measure considered by the meeting was a plan based upon "travelling Bishops".² Benson is silent regarding this, but Jonathan Crowther says that "Benson declared at the Bristol District-meeting, that he would henceforth be for" "bishops".³ However, nothing seems to have developed from this plan.

According to Crowther, the meeting finally concluded:

that the Trustees, by renouncing the authority of the Conference, had renounced the Connection, and that consequently those, who nevertheless would cleave to them and support them, in opposition to the desire and entreaties of their Brethren the Preachers.....did thereby, for the time, withdraw from the Connection.⁴

Benson comments:

Of the District Meeting that took upon them to expel us, who are all old Members of the Conference.....only three are of the Hundred. Of the rest, only two have been admitted into full connection five years, one four years, one two years, and three not one year. The two others are yet upon trial.⁵

¹Ibid.

²Benson says that Thompson left after the afternoon session for London. This discussion must have come during the last sitting of the District Meeting, for according to Thompson's letter to Benson (Ministers, III:52) the matter was discussed after he had departed.

³Crowther, "Crisis of Methodism", p.20.

⁴Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", p.15.

⁵Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of Sept.26th, 1794. It is interesting to note that, according to G. Smith, III, pp.218-19, Moore later contested a District Meeting's right to suspend a preacher.

And he adds, "and this with the consent of Messrs. Taylor, Hanby, Rhodes and Rutherford, as well as Dr. Coke".¹ The meeting appointed Thomas Rutherford and John Grant to fill the appointments of Benson, Rodda and Vasey who had been suspended.² Apparently, the expulsion of Benson, Rodda and Vasey from Portland was sanctioned by the meeting. This may be inferred from the rejection of Benson's first proposal that had denounced both the Room and the Portland trustees for expelling preachers. And finally it may be assumed from Bradburn's letter to Crowther on September 9th, stating "Nothing is legal with us 'till it is confirmed by a District Meeting", that the meeting gave its approval to the opposition chapel under construction.

Shortly after its termination on September 18th, the District Meeting published an account of its proceedings. A copy of this publication is no longer extant, but Benson says:

They declare.....in their Minutes, that they 'judge we have withdrawn ourselves from the Methodist Connection':.....'We think it our duty', they say, 'to bear a testimony against the conduct of Messrs. Benson, Rodda and Vasey, in their abrupt manner of leaving the Meeting, in the afternoon of the second and third day of the sitting of the Committee'.³

Benson says that he especially requested that the published minutes

¹Circular of September 26th, 1794.

²This year Rutherford had been assigned to London, while Grant had been placed in the Redruth circuit.

³Circular of September 26th, 1794.

include his own proposals but that his request was refused.¹

Probably Benson sent a letter by Jeremiah Brettell² to Alexander Mather³ in Manchester, because on September 20th, two days after the closing of the District Meeting, Mather addressed the following letter to Benson:

I am however glad Mr. Thompson was there and made so noble a stand. Particularly, that you all left them, with the full purpose of an appeal to Conference which was what I before hinted as the only recourse. They I hope will see those as we do. In direct opposition to every rule.....and showing a total indifference about the work;.....no more regarding our union, than the prosperity of the work.

Their proceedings is such as, I think, no reasonable man can by any means countenance who is not resolved at all hazards to become subject to all consequences of Violence and Phrensey. Religion and reason being as repugnant to every part of their proceedings; as all that has any the least connection with Methodism; so far as I have any knowledge of it.

¹Ibid.

²Jeremiah Brettell, who had been present at the meeting, was this year stationed in Manchester under the superintendency of Alexander Mather.

³Alexander Mather, president of Conference in 1792, was the only preacher whom Wesley ordained elder as well as bishop. Mather strongly supported the Conference Plan as seen from his role in the Dewsbury Chapel case. (See Mather, "A Supplement to the Rev. Dr. Coke's 'State of Dewsbury House'", London, 1788). In the early years after Wesley's death (1791-92) he was a leading member of the Sacramentarian party, having declared (according to Pawson's letter to C. Atmore of Dec.13th, 1793, quoted in J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of Atmore", Meth.Mag., Vol.68, p.315) to the 1791 Conference that Wesley intended for him to ordain other preachers. However, at the 1792 Conference, Mather began to fear a possible Methodist schism and (according to Pawson's letter to Atmore of June 21st, 1793, quoted in Stamp, p.220) wished for "moderate measures" in order "to prevent divisions". At the Lichfield meeting, he opposed the "Bishops Plan". This year Mather was superintendent of the Manchester circuit.

Surely you plan to send to the 100, and call another Conference, without delay. For this you plan to draw up a proper letter and get a sight of the Minutes of the District; state from them your expulsion; and the first appointment, with every other contempt of the Conference. And get it printed and send to every member of the Conference. Mr. Thompson may, and no doubt will oppose the coming of Mr. Rutherford, from his appointment by the Conference.

You may desire any you please to direct to me, and if it be found necessary, when you write to call a Conference, you may have with yours, Messrs. Rodda, Vasey and Thompson and my name when I know what you are to sign it to.

I shall write to as many as I can on the business now: But I wish our Lord Jesus Christ had drawn up a circular letter, and sent it off from Bristol. You must not be discouraged. This will no doubt work together for good in the end.¹

Beyond the fact that the District Meeting gave a legal colouring to the activities of the Portland party, it made little difference in the affairs of Bristol. All hope for a settlement had now vanished, and the circuit remained split though on a more permanent basis. This year, the circuit had reported one thousand, six hundred and fifteen members to the Conference.² Of these one thousand, three hundred attended the ministry of Moore and his helpers, while the remaining three hundred attended that of Benson and his associates.³ This division among the people took place

¹MS. letter from Mather to Benson found in Additional Letter Book, IV:8 which is located in the Book Room Archives in London.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p.291.

³Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", pp.8 and 17. See also Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of September 26th, 1794.

prior to Benson's arrival in Bristol,¹ and the situation seems to have remained unchanged. Benson, who was accustomed to preach to large congregations, refers in his journal for September 14th to his small congregations resulting from the dispute.² Mary Blacker says that Benson's hearers on Sunday evenings were smaller than those of Moore "at five o'clock in the morning".³

On September 26th, eight days after the termination of the District Meeting, Benson, Rodda and Vasey published a circular: "To the Preachers Late in Connection with the Rev. Wesley", which seems to be chiefly the work of Benson. He begins by elaborating his plans to restore peace upon his arrival in Bristol and traces the measures he took upon his arrival to gain this end. Describing the illegal activities of both sides, neither of which he could endorse, he says that he was finally offered the condition that if he preached in the chapels of the Room trustees, he would in turn be expelled from Portland Chapel. But Benson declares that he was reluctant to abandon these chapels:

now that the Trustees are willing they should be settled on that Plan, at least as far as regards the chief point, said to be in dispute, viz. the securing the appointment of Preachers to the Conference.⁴

¹MS. letter from Coke, Moore and Rutherford to Mr. King, dated August 25th, 1794.

²Macdonald, pp. 271-72.

³Quoted in J.R. Gregory, "Notes from an Old Methodist Journal", Winter Number of the Methodist Recorder, 1901, p. 68.

⁴Circular of September 26th, 1794.

and that he, along with Rodda and Vasey, was expelled from Portland.

After explaining the proceedings of the District Meeting and its refusal to accept any of his proposals as a basis for a reconciliation, Benson says:

Indeed our opponents.....have discovered the most determined opposition to peace, on whatever terms it was offered..... And no wonder, for if peace had been made, what would have become of their whole plan of buying and building: Besides the double purchase of ground to build new Chapels on.....they had entered into engagements to lay out upon the premises at one of the places, not less a sum than that of £2,500.....It would have disconcerted all their schemes,.....and left them involved in bargains and debts, out of which it would have required a pretty capital sum to have extricated them.Hence they dreaded a Peace-maker.....and had the same objection to our preaching in Portland Chapel.....for it possibly might have disposed some of the people to wish for peace.¹

In conclusion Benson declares that he thinks it "advisable" to have an extra Conference sitting for the purpose of settling the dispute.

The next three months witnessed little change on the local Bristol scene. The two Bristol circuits carried on their own separate activities without any violence being reported. King Street Chapel continued with its building programme, but there was no hope of its completion before the late spring of 1795.

In the meantime while great numbers of the local people were growing weary of the dispute², the fact of Benson's expulsion from

¹Ibid.

²Treffry, p.192, quotes from Benson's journal: "God has strangely over-ruled the division to the stirring of many of the people up". On this same day of Oct.12th, a clergyman visited Benson and assured him that he could obtain holy orders for him. But Benson refused.

Portland Chapel was beginning to be embarrassing to the Portland party. Benson, who was receiving many letters that sympathised with his position¹, had lent his personal prestige to the Room party and it was expedient for the Portland party to rectify this situation. Accordingly on October 15th, Henry Moore proposed to Benson that if "he should leave the service of the trustees, and come over to the society;.....that in that case I would leave Bristol". But "this", Moore says, Benson "refused to do".²

If by October the local scene had resulted in a deadlock with each side having largely spent its force, this was far from the case regarding the Connexion at large. The circulars published from Bristol were just beginning to have serious repercussions throughout the Connexion, and many months of widespread agitation, with increasing alarm over a possible schism, was to follow before the dispute would show any sign of subsiding. The conservative elements, who had resisted the sacramental innovation, and the liberal elements, who had sanctioned it, read their respective causes into the proclaimed events and responded accordingly. Attention is now turned to this reaction in the Connexion as seen in the many circulars that appeared in response to the situation.

¹Among these letters were those from trustees from Otley, Pateley-Bridge, Lofthouse, Lettlesing, Bramley and Armley. These letters are quoted in the "Address of the Trustees of Manchester, Salford and Stockport", October 21st, 1794. One interesting letter, still extant, came from a magistrate at Deptford dated Dec.7th, 1794.

²"Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society in Leeds". Dec.6th, 1794. Signed "Onesimus".

CHAPTER NINE

The Circular War

It was apparent to the members of the Connexion, who were already split over the sacramental innovation, that the Room party represented the Churchmen and the Portland party represented the Sacramentarians. Thus, they chose their respective sides mainly on the basis of individual preconceived views regarding the sacramental issue and responded accordingly. Since the Portland party's circulars had given their entire attention to the violation of Conference regulations by the Room party and the Room had retaliated with similar charges, the subject of Conference authority became the centre of focus. As stated earlier, it was a season in Methodist history ripe for this particular shift in attention. For the necessity of insuring Conference's four-year-old leadership following Wesley's death was naturally prominent in the mind of the Connexion, and in this light the charges of violation of Conference authority appeared especially grave and the situation critical. But though the multiplicity of circulars responding to the Bristol situation dwell primarily upon anti-Conference activities with but slight mention of the sacramental issue, this issue nevertheless moved behind the scenes as the main factor that determined the vantage point of most of the publications.

Some of the circulars and pamphlets are not dated, and clues in their contents have been used in fixing their approximate date

of publication. But roughly between October 1794 and January 1795 the circulars are of a number and nature that fit them into this polemic group. Out of twenty-two extant circulars and pamphlets published in this period thirteen support the Portland party, three support the Room¹, and six are middle of the road. The development will be traced by presenting the circulars chronologically and giving the significant points of argument so that the response to one another can be seen.

The first circular to appear outside of Bristol was published in Liverpool in October, 1794, by two distinguished Sacramentarians, Thomas Hanby and John Pawson. They introduce their letter by opposing Benson's proposal for an extra Conference, because of "the enormous expense that we know must attend it", but the main concern of the writers is to condemn trustees in general, who, they contend, wish "to divide us, that they may rule over us, and bring us into bondage".² Local Bristol circulars had already charged the Room trustees with defying Conference; however, this letter of Hanby and Pawson is of particular significance in that it is the first to sound the alarm warning of a more widespread trustee threat. The conclusion to their letter attempts to clarify the "main point" in dispute in Bristol. They write:

¹One of these represents the opinion of seventy-one sets of trustees.

²Hanby and Pawson, "To the Preschers late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley". A postscript enjoined is signed by Pawson, A. Clarke, and A. Mayor, all stationed in the Liverpool circuit.

The point now in debate is not respecting the Sacrament only; but chiefly whether the Trustees in Bristol shall have power to choose their preachers, and change them monthly, and thus rule the Conference; or the Conference have power to station the preachers as it has always done from the beginning?¹

This illustrates how the issue regarding Conference authority and trustee power became grossly inflated.

Hanby and Pawson's circular was followed by another on October 13th from the preachers of the Redruth District.² Unique among the letters which follow, because it makes no accusations against either party in Bristol, this letter directs its concern to the restoration of peace. The authors recommend:

- 1st, for the Trustees of the Chapels in Broadmead and Guinea-Street to settle those Houses on the Conference Plan.
- 2nd, for the Trustees of Portland Chapel to dispose of that which they are now building in or near the Broad-Mead.
- 3rd, that the expenses attending such Sale.....be made up either by a private subscription.....or by a Public Collection in all our principal Places throughout the Kingdom.³

A few days prior to October 21st, trustees from Manchester, Salford and Stockport, all noted for their opposition to the sacramental innovation, held a meeting at Manchester to discuss the dispute. After passing judgment on the situation, they sent a

¹Ibid.

²"To the Preachers late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley and all whom it may concern". October 13th, 1794. This is signed by ten preachers.

³Ibid.

printed letter on October 21st to trustees throughout the Connexion.¹ Their letter is a remarkable example of interpreting events in Bristol to suit their own cause. This is apparent in their expressed attitude regarding the expulsions from chapels in Bristol. They readily applaud the Room trustees for expelling Moore "because it does not appear from the last Minutes that he was authorised by the Conference, either to administer, or assist in.....the ordinances in Portland Chapel". However, when they turn to Benson, Rodda and Vasey's expulsion, they do not hesitate to call this "a direct opposition to the appointment of Conference. The Business of the Trustees was, to receive them." According to the writers, the real difficulty lies with "Dr. Coke and others" who have a "Plan, the object of which is to exalt themselves.....above their brethren: as appears.....in the Resolutions of the Litchfield Meeting". The writers suggest that the Room trustees "make another offer of their Chapels to Mr. Moore" on the condition that he promise not to administer at Portland until the next Conference and that Benson be given access to Portland Chapel. The circular closes with these four declarations:

- 1st, We are determined to afford it (i.e. Ancient Methodism) all the support in our power, and to suffer no innovations, without the same being first agreed upon between us and the Conference,
- 2nd,.....to do all.....to support those Preachers

¹"To our Brethren of the Methodist Societies at Bristol, and Elsewhere". October 21st, 1794, Manchester. This letter is signed by seven Manchester, five Salford and thirteen Stockport trustees.

who act agreeable to the Rules of Conference.....
 3rd, We cannot in conscience countenance.....those
 Preachers, who can so glaringly deviate from the
 Rules of Conference.....
 4th,.....the building of Chapels merely from a
 spirit of opposition, and without taking the steps
according to the Rule of Conference, is.....
 bringing a large debt upon the whole Connection,
 but also is a lasting monument of disgrace.....
 We cannot in future admit those Preachers into
 our Chapels, who then continue to foment divisions
 by preaching in such Chapels.¹

Although, as it can be seen from their declarations, the writers readily apply "the Rules of Conference" in order to indict the Portland party, the last sentence of their fourth declaration left them open to the charge of threatening Conference and provided ammunition for those who were aiming at spreading the alarm over trustee power.

The Manchester circular was followed by two relatively unimportant letters from Cornwall. The first, written by a local preacher, Richard Williams, contains two addresses "To J. Benson" and "To W. Thompson". Limiting his concern to the sacramental issue, Williams applies the scriptures to the dispute and proves that it is improper to wrangle over the Lord's Supper², but he does not approach the stage of coming to grips with the problem. The latter Cornwall circular, also from local preachers, is composed of a plan for reconciliation.³ The plan is irrelevant and,

¹Ibid.

²Richard Williams, "A Brief Address to the Methodists in Cornwall", October 22nd, 1794.

³"Address of the Local Preachers in the Cornwall Circuit". 1794.

as George Smith aptly describes, "embraces everything but the alleged ground of all the disunion".¹

Later this month, on October 27th, Alexander Mather published a circular from Manchester "To the Preschers late in Connection with the Rev. Mr. Wesley". Although Mather is disposed in favour of Benson, Rodda and Vasey, and is interested in exposing the activities of the Portland party, nevertheless his letter reveals that he was well informed on the situation, and it is one of the clearest and most candid presentations of the dispute which appeared during these turbulent months.

Mather expresses the opinion that both sides should have their views respected regarding the sacramental innovation. He then dismisses this subject by observing, "all of you rejoice with me that it is not the sacrament which is now the point of debate", for it now relates to the issue of "Conference authority".²

Turning his attention to this issue, Mather attempts to trace how it arose. He recounts how the trouble at the 1794 Conference between the Room trustees and Henry Moore was temporarily settled by Vasey's appointment to Bristol and how the preachers felt that Moore "on cool reflection" would administer only at the other Bristol chapels and would desist from administering at Portland. Describing how Moore ignored the trustees' warning and how they

¹G. Smith, II, p.116.

²Mather's Circular of October 27th, 1794.

retaliated by expelling him, Mather admits that the trustees' action was serious and was worthy of condemnation. But regarding the Portland party's charge against the trustees, he says:

I had some opportunities of conversing with the Trustees while in Bristol, and I could not discern that 'they had any design to divide, that they might rule over us'. But if I had discovered such a design, I should not have regarded it, as I know it would have tended to knit us closer to each other.¹

Having conceded that the Room trustees acted wrongly in expelling Moore, and having defended them against the accusation that they intend to divide the preachers, Mather directs his concern to the grievances of the Portland party, which, he says, has claimed to be the defenders of Conference authority. After referring to their erection of an unauthorised chapel, to their expulsion of Benson, Rodda and Vasey, and to the District Meeting's suspension of these preachers, Mather says that these incidents demonstrate that the Portland party are "guilty of treble tyranny, cruelty and oppression". He queries:

Can you inform me from whom these three brethren are gone, and whom they are serving? Who appointed them their stations? did not you?What can these brethren do till next Conference, seeing they have been opposed, (by brethren whom you appointed for other circuits) in various places in the circuit to which you appointed them.

.....What can they do, I say, but either remain in their appointment, not indeed to take part with Trustees (whether right or wrong) against you, but to preserve all they can of the people for you? or else to 'be received with open arms', by the brethren who, under a pretence of supporting you, have, it appears, trampled all your authority, under their feet, and to unite with these in the same contempt of you.²

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

To render matters worse, Mather says that those who have expelled Benson, Rodda and Vasey do not have the least desire of peace, unless we:

sanction all they have done, with the outrages they have occasioned; and saddle ourselves with an annual rent of £46 : 10s. and the interest of at least £1500 if not £2000 which the House now building will cost, over and above all they have collected or can collect; to say nothing of the sum of £382 : 5s. paid for ground and writings near Guinea-street, where we have already a very good Chapel, without any burden brought on the Conference, and the engagements entered into to pay £10 per ann. to Portland Chapel for the exchange of £1000 lent to it at 4 percent.¹

Mather closes his letter by asserting that:

the sentiments of a great majority of the Hundred are already obtained, who approve of the conduct of our Three Brethren at Bristol, and disapprove the rash and precipitate steps taken to oppose them.²

William Thompson adds the following postscript to Mather's letter:

I hope no Assistant will suffer a shilling to be collected in his Circuit for the New Chapels in Bristol, or any other Chapel which has not the consent of Conference for building it: - for if two or three Preachers, or a few Trustees are encouraged by any Preacher to buy ground and build Chapels at Pleasure, the Body will soon be involved in a Debt that will disgrace and ruin them.³

Mather's circular was followed by a pamphlet published

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³This postscript is dated October 30th, 1794.

anonymously from Bristol.¹ The purpose of this pamphlet is to show that lay administration as well as separation from Anglicanism are both consistent with the "Old Plan". The writer declares:

the administration of the Lord's Supper by the Preachers, is not contrary to the Old Plan; and if the Trustees read the Conference-Deed, they will there see, that the manner of worship is not even mentioned, but only the doctrines taught.²

Regarding the latter subject, he says:

I shall.....quote some of Mr. Wesley's declarations which favour a separation from the Church of England, and which is by some called a departure from the old plan. Now the ordination of Ministers to perform the whole of the ministerial function, viz. preach and administer the Sacraments, must be considered the most material link in this chain, and all the rest follow of course.³

In the meanwhile, Alexander Mather's interpretation of events in Bristol was being keenly felt by the Portland party, and so on November 10th, Jonathan Crowther took up his pen in defence.⁴ Opening his pamphlet by expressing his amazement that Mether has become the "Apologist" for the Room trustees, Crowther then directs his attention to an explanation of the motives behind his party's actions. He says:

¹"Remarks on Several Passages in the Works of the Late Rev. John Wesley being a Brief Description of what is called 'the Old Plan'". Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794.

²Ibid., p.3.

³Ibid., p.9.

⁴J. Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact".

a combination of Trustees has been formed in the nation, which if successful, must destroy the liberty and independence of the Preachers.¹

This is a reiteration of the charge found in Hanby and Pawson's circular, and it is understandable in the light of the Manchester circular's declarations. Crowther continues his explanation by saying:

those who are represented as opposing Mr. Benson, &c., acted from persuasion of a formidable combination against the body of Preachers, and that what the Trustees did at Bristol, if they had proved triumphant, was to be the signal-gun to their confederates in other parts of the nation.I considered Mr. Moore, Dr. Coke, &c., as fighting a battle for the whole Methodist Connection, and for more generations than the present.²

In explanation of the conduct of the District Meeting, Crowther says:

They considered Mess. Benson, Rodda and Vasey as being unfaithful to the Conference, and as warring against the interests of the Preachers in general, by aiding and abetting those Trustees who were known to have been troublesome to Mr. Wesley and the Preachers for many years.³

Mr. Mather will have it, that Mess. Benson, Rodda, and Vasey are in their place and fulfilling the appointment of the Conference. To this I answer, I think the Conference does not appoint Preachers to preach to Trustees and a few of their friends, nor yet properly speaking, in this house or that, but to preach to the Society at large.⁴

In conclusion Crowther attempts to answer all of the charges

¹Ibid., pp.5-6.

²Ibid., p.6.

³Ibid., p.8.

⁴Ibid., p.9.

brought against his party by saying that the dispute was "extraordinary" and "beyond the reach of all common rules". Thus, in answer to the complaint that "Mr. Moore and his Helpers" had acted against the rule of Conference, Crowther declares:

And in all cases that never occurred before,
and that cannot be foreseen, no Rule can be
made prior to the event.¹

On November 15th, five days after Crowther's pamphlet had appeared, another pamphlet was printed from Bristol signed "Aquila and Priscilla".² The writers use the familiar approach by denouncing the Room trustees' expulsion of Moore and explaining that the Portland trustees "could not admit Mr. Benson to preach in their Chapel, when they saw him resolved to countenance the other Trustees".³ Later, however, a shift of emphasis is seen in this pamphlet, for the writers reflect a primary interest in the sacramental innovation and assert that this is the cause of the breach in Bristol. This indicates that the sacramental issue in Bristol had not been completely obscured by other considerations there. After expressing their astonishment over Benson siding with those who have resisted this innovation, the writers declare:

It was very probable, that through the
influence of Mr. Benson, Ordination was first
introduced into the connection. He earnestly

¹Ibid., pp.12-13.

²"An Humble Address to the Methodist Societies in General; and to Trustees, Leaders, and Stewards in Particular". Bristol, R. Edwards, Nov.15th, 1794.

³Ibid., p.8.

intreated Mr. Fletcher to write to Mr. Wesley to get him to ordain preachers, and introduce the ordinances. Mr. Fletcher did so; and soon after Mr. Wesley ordained some of the preachers, and authorised them to baptize and administer the Lord's Supper.¹

The above remark is of particular interest because it appears word for word in two later publications.² Aquila and Priscilla continue their discussion about Benson's earlier sacramental views and remark that he "frequently declared, both in the Conference and among his friends, that.....the people.....ought to have the ordinance".³ The writers assert that even at the 1794 Conference Benson "begged to know, if he were excluded from the work and blessing of the Lord's Supper, in the late decree".⁴ Thus, they conclude, "It would be very easy to write a pamphlet with this title, 'Benson against Benson'".⁵

The next publication, also originating from Bristol in November, was anonymously signed "A Member of the Established Church".⁶ The

¹Ibid., p.8.

²"An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society in Leeds....." Leeds, T. Hannam, 1794, p.31.

John Murlin, "Circular to Brother Benson", Wycombe, Dec.23rd, 1794.

³Ibid., p.9.

⁴Ibid., p.7.

⁵Ibid., p.9.

⁶"Considerations on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church; addressed to such of them as are Friendly to that Measure, and Particularly to Those in the City of Bristol". Bristol, Bulgin and Rosser, 1794. According to J. Crowther, "Crisis of Methodism", this pamphlet was written by Alexander Knox. Since it may be inferred from a circular of Dec.6th, signed Onesimus, that Moore replied to this pamphlet between Nov.30th and Dec.4th, it was probably written late in November.

author charges both parties with violating Conference rules, but he indicates that the dispute is essentially a result of Methodism separating from the Church. The majority of his pages, however, are taken up with elaborate reasons why Methodism should not have separated and with the evils that have followed as a result of it. Henry Moore immediately replied to this pamphlet by attacking the charge of separation as a "wilful falsehood", and showing that the author had quoted from the Minutes of the American Conference of 1784 to prove that English Methodism had separated from the Church.¹

On December 6th, another pamphlet supporting the Portland party was published from Leeds signed by the pen-name "Onesimus".² The first thirteen pages bear the date December 1st, but a "Postscript" of twenty-two pages was added on December 6th. Onesimus, as he himself states, follows the example of Henry Moore by attacking the charge of a Methodist separation from the Church as "the lie of the day"³, but to this writer the feature of significance is the dispute's relation to Conference authority. He condemns the Room trustees who "in defiance of Conference.....expelled Mr. Moore"⁴, while he excuses the expulsion of Benson, because Benson was "determined to support these trustees in opposition to Mr. Moore.....and most of

¹Henry Moore, "A Reply to a Pamphlet, entitled, Considerations on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church". Bristol, R. Edwards, 1794.

²Onesimus, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Society, in Leeds, and Elsewhere....." Leeds, Thomas Hannam, 1794.

³Ibid., p.14.

⁴Ibid., p.5.

the circuit".¹ Onesimus does not believe that Benson wished to sanction the Room trustees in their defiance of Conference; he feels that Benson took his stand on the basis of the sacramental issue. In this the writer appears to have been influenced by the circular of Aquila and Priscilla, for he quotes verbatim their paragraph about Benson being an important instrument in bringing about the sacramental innovation and paraphrases their conclusion by stating that Benson's conduct is "unaccountable". According to Onesimus, Benson's stand in Bristol is of the greatest moment for the Connexional crisis, since the Room trustees' survival is entirely due to Benson's support. He writes:

Some take part with the trustees, because so able a person as Mr. Benson has enlisted into their service; not considering that there is as much reason to withstand Mr. Benson, in these things that are wrong, as there could be in Paul's opposition to Peter.

Had Mr. Benson attended to the wishes of the great majority of the society at Bristol, as was properly his business, there is every reason to believe, that the clamours of the trustees would have been silenced at once.²

The next circular, from six laymen at Trowbridge and entitled "To the Methodists of the Bradford Circuit"³, bears a false date, October 6th, 1794. References in this circular to three publications, i.e. by Samuel Bradburn on October 11th, by Benson in November and by Jonathan Crowther on November 10th, date it with certainty

¹Ibid. p.6.

²Ibid., p.26.

³"To the Methodists of the Bradford Circuit". Trowbridge, October 6th, 1794.

sometime after November 10th. This is the only source which records that Bradburn and Benson published letters during the months of October and November. Regarding the former's letter, the Trowbridge writers simply state that "Mr. Bradburn asserted..... that Mr. Benson chose to go to Bristol. He might have gone to Leeds, if he would. He did not go to Bristol by chance."¹ They do not remark about Benson's letter but assume from his letter that he and Bradburn are "of one mind" respecting the Church and the Sacrament:

unless Mr. Benson have very lately materially changed his mind, which would be no surprise to Mr. Bradburn, who well knows Mr. Benson has often done this; perhaps, owing to his impartial search after the truth.²

After restating the charge found in previous publications that Benson had altered his stand on the sacramental issue, the Trowbridge writers present an elaborate analogy between the Birstal trustee case of 1782 and the present case with the Room trustees, for the purpose of superposing the accepted stigma of the former on to the latter. To confirm their view, they quote a letter from Coke, Moore, Rhodes and Rutherford.

It is evident from this pamphlet that Trowbridge was having trouble over the sacramental issue in their own society. The

¹The letter fails to consider the fact that Benson tried to alter his appointment. Benson's journal as quoted by Macdonald, p. 268.

²Trowbridge Circular.

writers allude to this by publishing their own plans for local peace. Concluding the circular the writers declare that they are willing to relinquish their own desire for administration in their own chapel, "rather than cause strife"; instead they plan to substitute "a private method of administration", which "commences the next Lord's-Day, after the evening service".¹

The contention over the Sacrament at Trowbridge was not an isolated case; events similar in nature were occurring elsewhere in the Connexion. Late in October, 1794, the Halifax society became split over the innovation, but peace was restored there on November 3rd when those who desired the Sacrament decided to "relinquish their claim on its administration.....until the ensuing Conference".² The Liverpool society also split over this question at the same time. The preachers there were all in favour of the Sacrament, and it appears that the liberals, who were in the majority, went ahead with their plans despite the opposition.³

On December 10th, a circular signed by forty-three trustees and leaders of the Liverpool society was published in reply to the October 21st circular from Manchester.⁴ It is noteworthy that while the Liverpool trustees agree with the Manchester, Salford and

¹Ibid.

²J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of C. Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, pp. 325-26.

³See the postscript attached to Hanby and Pawson's circular of October, 1794.

⁴"To the Trustees of Manchester and Stockport; and to the Friends of the Methodist Connexion". Liverpool, Dec. 10th, 1794.

Stockport trustees over the sacramental innovation, regarding the Room trustees, they say, "our minds are.....pained to find that you.....commend, that unprecedented act of the trustees in excluding Mr. Moore from their chapels".¹ On the other hand, when the Liverpool writers consider the similar action of the Portland trustees, they declare:

How far the necessity of the case required the trustees of Portland Chapel to act as they have done, we think those preachers who were on the spot, and those who formed the District meeting, are best able to determine. We therefore leave this business with them till the next Conference re-consider the matter.²

This circular represents an unusual example in that the writers are against the sacramental innovation and yet lend their support to the Portland party.

The next letter was published by John Murlin from Wycombe on December 23rd.³ Murlin says that he has read most of the circulars published, and he believes that the Connexional crisis has arisen from conflicting interpretations of the "Old Plan". After declaring that Mr. Wesley has said that he "had no plan at all" and that "everything arose just as occasion offered", he says:

I believe it is best not to make any decree about the Sacrament; where the people desire it, they ought to have it, where they do not

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³John Murlin, "Letter to Brother Benson". Wycombe, Dec. 23rd, 1794.

desire it, it ought not to be forced upon them; where the people are divided let each part receive it where and by whom they please.¹

Continuing his discussion on how conflicting opinion on the "Old Plan" has led to the present crisis, Murlin says:

I apprehend the ground of the dispute between them (i.e. in Bristol), to consist in two points: First, one Party insists on Primitive Methodism; the Other Party plead for liberty of Conscience.²

Therefore, since Murlin believes that the dispute is primarily over the sacramental issue, when he turns to discuss Benson's support of the Room trustees, he expresses his astonishment over Benson's stand. Murlin proceeds to cite how Benson himself preached during Church hours and then quotes verbatim the paragraph from Aquila and Priscilla's circular regarding Benson's agency in introducing ordination and the sacraments. In conclusion he recommends that Thompson's plan of placing Portland Chapel in a different circuit is the best means for restoring peace.

Meanwhile the October 21st circular of the Manchester, Salford and Stockport trustees had been received by trustees throughout England, and it had initiated unpublished replies from sixty-eight sets of trustees beginning with a letter from the Dudley trustees on November 7th, 1794 and ending with one from the Macclesfield trustees on January 2nd, 1795. Sometime between January 2nd and January 20th, the originators of the circular compiled and edited

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

from Manchester these replies in a forty page pamphlet.¹

The letters of all the sixty-eight² sets of trustees printed in this pamphlet, in addition to the reprint of the October 21st circular that prefaces the work, reveal that there is unanimous agreement on four points. The first and second are on their pledge to support the "Old Plan" and the itinerant system of Conference stationing preachers, while the third and fourth are on their denunciation of unauthorised chapels and the expulsion of Benson from Portland Chapel. But the most significant feature reflected in this pamphlet is the fact that sixty-eight of the seventy-one trustee groups interpret the "Old Plan" as being opposed to the sacramental innovation and declare an avowed resistance to it. The contrast between the trustees' unanimous support of Conference's right to station preachers and their view against administration by Methodist preachers makes it evident that the real

¹This pamphlet entitled "Address of the Trustees of Manchester, Salford and Stockport to the Methodist Societies at Bristol and Elsewhere", Manchester, 1795, must have appeared prior to Jan. 20th when John Pawson refers to it.

²Among the trustees whose letters are quoted are those from: Dudley, Tipton, Penzance, Chester, Pontefract, Redruth, Plymouth-Dock, Birmingham, Dewsbury, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Kighley, Tadcaster, Selby, Cawood, Burslem, Newcastle, Tunstall, Chesterton, Henley, Stafford, Leek, Wakefield, Otley, Pateley-Bridge, Lofthouse, Lettlesing, London, Falmouth, Scarborough, Congleton, Warrington, Leeds, Darlington, Burlington and Key, Nafferton, Driffield, Stilham, Hull, Wednesbury, Stockton, Malton, Sheffield, Darlaston, Bolton-Le-Moors, St. Austle, Preston, Worcester, Howden, Eastington, River-Bridge, North-Cave, Halifax, Pocklington, Market-Weighton, Holmes-Aulam, Birstal, Bramley, York, Armley, Easingwoud, Bradford, Pudsey, Eccleshill, Wichfield, Newmills, Bullock-Smithy and Macclesfield - sixty-eight in all.

threat was not, as it was being so loudly proclaimed, regarding the itinerant system but regarding trustee resistance to the sacramental innovation.

Although the majority of the letters published endorse in toto the programme of the editors, there are marks that distinguish them from one another. Five of them express the need for a trustee meeting prior to the 1795 Conference, three assert that trustees should have the authority to enforce correct doctrines and moral living on the preachers, while the Plymouth-Dock and the Halifax trustees, both of which favour the sacramental innovation, indicate their disapproval of both the Room and the Portland trustees for expelling preachers.

Two publications from trustees, stewards, and leaders and four from preachers appeared during the month of January in response to the Manchester pamphlet. The former two are from the Launceston¹ and the Newark² circuits. Both of these circulars agree in favouring the sacramental innovation and in expressing their disapproval of the Manchester pamphlet's sanction of the Room trustees for expelling Henry Moore. However, the Launceston circular is significant in that it proposes that trustees, stewards and leaders should have the

¹"Address of the Trustees, Local Preachers, Stewards, and Leaders of the Launceston Circuit, To the Preachers and Private Members of the Methodist Societies, late in Connexion with the Rev. John Wesley". January, 1795.

²"To the Methodist Connexion from the Trustees, Leaders, and Stewards of the Society in Newark". January, 1795.

authority to refuse a preacher on matters pertaining to "Doctrines, Morals, and Gifts". The writers interpret this as meaning that:

The Conference will have the appointment of the Preachers.....and the negative of the Trustees, Stewards, and Leaders in each Circuit, will be a sufficient guard against the abuse of that power.¹

Naturally the preachers showed the greatest concern over the Manchester pamphlet, and the first preacher to answer it was John Pawson on January 20th.² Pawson begins his pamphlet by observing:

There are two things which those who wish to divide us are now contending about, which it concerns us seriously to consider. First. What degree of power the Trustees of our Chapels ought to be invested with: Second. Whether we ought to separate from the established Church?³

Pawson seems to have altered his approach to the first concern, i.e. "What degree of power the Trustees.....ought to be invested with", in the light of the Manchester pamphlet expressing its approval of the itinerant plan and interpreting the "Old Plan" as being opposed to the sacramental innovation. This is seen in the contrast of his January 20th pamphlet with his October circular jointly written with Thomas Hanby. In the former, Pawson accuses trustees of attempting to usurp Conference's right to station

¹Launceston Circular.

²John Pawson, "An Affectionate Address to the Members of the Methodist Societies. To which are added, Extracts of Various Letters, written by the late Rev. Mr. Wesley, upon the Subject Now in Debate among them. With Remarks upon a late Publication from Manchester". Liverpool, January 20th, 1795.

³Ibid., p. 3.

preachers, while in this latter publication he treats the trustee threat from the vantage point of the sacramental issue. Keeping to his former observation that trustees are seeking additional power, he now says:

The Trustees want to bind you in chains of their own making. The Preachers wish to leave you at liberty, as you have ever been, to follow the openings of divine providence, and on all occasions to take such measures as shall appear to you to be most for the glory of God.¹

In evidence that the liberal policy of the preachers is consistent with the "Old Plan", Pawson says of Wesley:

The truth is Mr. Wesley never had any fixed plan. His grand end was the Salvation of Souls, and he pursued that end by the most likely and effectual means he could think of, and accordingly followed as providence opened the way.²

Regarding the second point, i.e. "whether we ought to separate from the established Church", he seeks to prove that the sacramental innovation should not be considered as a separation from the Church. Again citing the words of Wesley, Pawson says that according to Wesley, "the Methodists considered as a body, are.....the very Church of England itself". This, Pawson concludes, means that "were we to preach in Church hours, and have the Sacrament administered among ourselves, yet according to the Article, we belong to that Church as much as ever".³

Benjamin Rhodes was the second preacher to publish a reply to

¹Ibid., p.6.

²Ibid., p.25.

³Ibid., p.21.

the Manchester pamphlet.¹ Rhodes, who was in the inner circle of the Portland party, tries to erase two problems which had placed his party in an awkward position. The first of these problems relates to his party's claim that trustees were trying to seize Conference's right to appoint preachers. The Room trustees' contention that they wished to uphold this right of Conference and particularly the Manchester pamphlet's declaration in favour of the itinerant plan were apparent contradictions to this charge against trustees. Thus Rhodes maintains the position that it is still true that:

The Questions in debate are, 1st. Shall Trusteesplace and displace preachers: or, shall they not: 2nd. Shall Methodist preachers aid Trustees that claim and exert such a power: or, shall they not? 3rd. Shall we suffer a combination of Trustees and others to overturn Methodism? or shall we not?²

Attempting to trace how the trustee pledge in favour of the itinerant plan arose and how it is merely a veil over their real intentions, Rhodes says that prior to the flare-up in Bristol, trustees all over the Connexion were conspiring to overthrow Conference³ and to divide the Connexion.⁴ Then came the event when the Room trustees "trampled on" Conference and "laughed at its power", for they "were looking out for a new conference, on a New Plan, which they themselves should model, and over which preside". Rhodes says that the false pretence of supporting Conference had no

¹Benjamin Rhodes, "The Point Stated.....".

²Ibid., p.4.

³Ibid., p.6.

⁴Ibid., p.8.

existence "before Benson arrived in Bristol". But, he asserts, the danger of so open a policy was rectified when Benson "taught the trustees a new language".¹ Other trustees outside of Bristol soon learned the lesson and:

began to articulate 'we are for the conference. Conference men are we all. The Church. Old ground, Tried ground, &c.' Thus by the way of 'Old ground', he assisted his friends to step upon new. Then in one united effort of exclamation, No 'novel plans': 'no innovations': 'no ordination': 'no sacraments' &c.²

The second problem, of no less significance to Rhodes' party, had arisen from Joseph Benson's position in the dispute. Mather's detailed description of the illegal activities of the Portland party³ had been answered by Crowther's pamphlet of November 10th which asserted that Bristol was an "extraordinary case" and that "no Rule can be made prior to the event".⁴ But it was much easier to justify the breaking of abstract rules than to vindicate the expulsion of the popular personal figure of Benson. This latter fact was working to the disadvantage of the Portland party and Rhodes attempts to explain that his party had not acted against Benson personally. He says:

It is asked, 'If Mr. Benson had not gone to the trustees, but had left them and their houses to themselves - where could he have gone for the year? I answer, to his brethren,

¹Ibid., p.10.

²Ibid.

³Mather's circular of October 27th, 1794.

⁴Crowther, "Truth and Matter of Fact", pp.12-13.

who ardently invited him and longed with open arms to receive him: the honest methodist society in Bristol. These he would have found as congenial to his real sentiments, as those to whom he went.¹

However, it was not merely their treatment of Benson which was causing distress to the Portland party; perhaps more important was the manner in which his stand in Bristol was being interpreted. If, as it appeared likely from his knowledge of the Manchester pamphlet, Rhodes suspected that the real force behind trustee unity was their opposition to innovations, then it was significant to the Portland party's cause to exhibit how Benson himself favoured innovations. This may explain why Rhodes gives so detailed an account of Benson's views regarding the Sacrament and preaching during Church hours.

Explaining that Benson's "real sentiments" are identical to those of the Portland party and different from those expressed in the Manchester pamphlet, Rhodes says, "Mr. Benson has no more objection (where it is likely to do good) to have service in church hours, than Mr. Moore has".² Turning to the other innovation regarding the Lord's Supper, Rhodes describes how Benson had introduced the Sacrament into Sheffield, and adds, "Nor indeed has he any more objection to the sacrament, than I have, where the people claim it".³ After recounting an incident in which Benson

¹Rhodes, "The Point Stated", p.20.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p.21.

convinced a local preacher that the people should have the Sacrament, Rhodes concludes:

Might not, then Mr. Benson have come, without any injury to his conscience, among so loving a people as worship at Portland Chapel? Seeing they so perfectly agree in sentiment. Which, if he had done, I am persuaded, confusion would not have spread its gloom over the kingdom; nor would 'divisions' have been 'formented' among us.¹

A third preacher to reply to the Manchester pamphlet was Jonathan Crowther², who like Rhodes, was present at the District Meeting in support of the policy of Coke and Moore. Crowther expresses the opinion that trustees should be put in their proper place, because, he warns:

if Trustees be justified and supported, in opposing and throwing off the authority of the Conference, in one important instance, it is probable, they will not stop here.³

Consequently, he proposed that the next Conference pass a rule:

That if the Trustees of any place expel any Preacher from a Chapel without sufficient reasons.....no other Preacher shall preach in such Chapel; or if any do, they shall be considered as thereby leaving the connection.⁴

Turning his attention to the accusation that the District Meeting was "prejudiced against Mr. Benson and his colleagues", Crowther replies:

¹Ibid.

²J. Crowther, "The Crisis of Methodism:.....To which are added, Some Remarks on the Address of the Trustees of Manchester &c.". Bristol, R. Edwards, 1795.

³Ibid., p.12.

⁴Ibid., p.24.

I believe there never was an assembly of men who possessed less prejudice against an individual than they did against Mr. Benson. If they could have done it without doing violence to their own understanding, I believe it would have given them great pleasure to have decided every question in his favour. If any person could have influenced them to sacrifice their own judgments, and what they believed to be an important cause, Mr. Benson would have done it as soon as any other.¹

Crowther, like Rhodes, reveals the apprehension that the apparent position of Benson in the dispute might influence others against the Portland cause. But while Rhodes contends that Benson does not support the Church party and is of the Sacramentarian opinion regarding the innovations, Crowther maintains that Benson is "not for justifying Trustees" in opposition to "the authority of the Conference" but is "only" "against a separation from the Church, which the opponents of the Trustees will not contend for, except in a partial way".²

The fourth publication to appear from preachers in reply to the Manchester pamphlet came from certain local preachers in the Leeds circuit.³ The Leeds writers appear to be less informed than the writers of the previous three pamphlets and their letter is, for the most part, a repetition of arguments given in other publications. However, their letter does reflect a more violent reaction to the Manchester pamphlet than any of the other responses. Indeed, in

¹Ibid., pp.11-12.

²Ibid., p.20.

³"From the Planned Local Preachers, in the Circuit of Leeds, to the Trustees of the Methodist Chapels, at Manchester and Others united with them in their Address to Bristol and Elsewhere". Leeds, 1795.

addition to the writers' strong denunciation of the Manchester combination, their letter is opposed to the views represented in the Manchester pamphlet in nearly every conceivable way; for they advocate the sacramental innovation, sanction a separation from the Church, criticise the role of Benson, Rodda and Vasey, and finally censure the Room trustees for laying "plans to divide the preachers and split the Connection".¹

This circular from Leeds conveniently marks the termination of the period from October, 1794, through January, 1795, during which time the publications were characterised by their indictments and warnings against one Bristol party and their apologies and praise of the other. Although some critical letters do appear after January, generally speaking, both the events and the publications of the next six months between February and July, 1795, indicate that this was a period of reconciliation.

¹Ibid.

CHAPTER TEN

The Plan of Pacification

The secondary sources that treat the Bristol Dispute are less informing about the six month period from February to July leading up to the 1795 Conference than about any other phase of the subject. In the primary sources the material is not abundant but it is sufficient for an attempt to fill this gap. The few extant publications and the few recorded events will be presented as they occurred in an endeavour to reconstruct this period which culminated in what is commonly known as the Plan of Pacification. Through such a record and also through information found in letters and journals, the fluctuations in the conciliatory climate can be seen.

The month of February, 1795, marked a change in the attitude on both the local and the Connexional fronts. Both sides were weary of dispute, and this month witnessed a lapse in the publications with all eyes of the Connexion looking to Bristol to assume the initiative. The silence was broken by only one pamphlet entitled: "A Conciliatory Essay, Addressed to the Methodists in General". The pamphlet is, in the main, a plea for peace, but the authors, who claim to have no private commitment on the sacramental issue, allot much of their space to an explanation of the motives behind those who object to the innovation. They declare that the primary reason for this arises from a fear that it will cause a

separation from the Church.¹

Meanwhile the disadvantages of a continued breach was becoming more apparent in Bristol. No attempt had been made toward pacification since the Portland party had rejected Benson's and Thompson's proposals for a settlement earlier at the District Meeting; however, many factors had arisen which were beginning to thaw the aloofness of the Portland party and render a reconciliation desirable. By February, King Street Chapel, which had been deeded to Thomas Coke on January 23rd, was well on the way toward completion.² In addition, the Connexion-wide subscriptions for raising funds for this chapel, in itself a violation of Conference regulations³, had already become a liability rather than an asset. The embarrassment over this and other illegal activities, making it virtually impossible for the Portland party to continue to pose as the champions of Conference, was acute. Indeed, if they hoped to avoid exposing the situation to Conference's close scrutiny, some form of settlement had to be made prior to Conference's next sitting in July. Thus, with the situation more favourable for a compromise

¹"A Conciliatory Essay, Addressed to the Methodists in General". Sunderland, T. Reed, 1795, pp.15-16.

²The January 23rd, 1795, Deed of King Street Chapel conveyed the property to Thomas Coke. The property remained in his hands until a deed drawn up on June 1st, 1800, transferred the property to twenty-two trustees who agreed to settle the chapel on the Model Deed of February 28th, 1784.

³According to the Minutes of Conference, I, p.262, a collection for chapel funds was prohibited without Conference's permission being first obtained.

the leaders on both sides made plans to meet and discuss the possibilities for reconciliation.

According to James Macdonald, Benson drew up a plan of settlement on February 18th¹; however, Macdonald makes no hint of the contents of this plan. Three days later on February 21st, a meeting was held by Benson, Moore and Bradburn at Kingswood, and Benson's journal of February 21st records that Moore and Bradburn were agreeable to his plan:

Mr. Bradburn, Mr. Moore and I, met at Kingswood this forenoon at eleven o'clock, and had much conversation together. We agreed upon a letter to the Preachers, containing the general outlines of a plan on which, it appeared to us, all parties might unite, and by means of which a division of the Methodist body might be prevented. This was the same in substance that I had previously drawn up.²

In his journal bearing the same date, Samuel Bradburn writes:

This day I went to Kingswood, and returned. My design was to make peace, if possible; and I succeeded in a good degree.³

Therefore the February 21st meeting resulted in Moore and Bradburn agreeing to the outlines of Benson's plan of February 18th, but there is no direct evidence which suggests what this plan was. It will be recalled that two plans had been advanced at the District

¹Quoted in Macdonald, p.274. Macdonald declares his reluctance to enter into the details of this controversy because he does not want to show partiality to either side.

²Quoted in Macdonald, p.274.

³Quoted in Treffry, p.193.

Meeting. The first plan, presented by Benson, had incorporated proposals for Portland Chapel forbearing with lay administration until the society should be unanimously for it, the dropping of plans for King Street Chapel, and finally the Room trustees revoking their notice to Moore. Certainly the former two proposals were out of the question, but the latter proposal would have been necessarily a part of any plan to restore peace, and it is likely that it composed part of Benson's February 18th plan. The other plan, presented by William Thompson, had proposed that Portland be added to a different circuit, but since Thompson's plan does not appear in any of the plans which were published later this spring, it is improbable that it was among the points of agreement.

On the following month, Benson's journal for March 21st records:

This week I have been employed pretty much in meeting classes. The rest of my time has been occupied, chiefly, in drawing up a general plan of pacification, which I have transcribed, and sent to Mr. Mather, to be laid before the Manchester and Stockport trustees; and to be copied and sent to Leeds, Sheffield, and Hull. I trust it will meet with acceptance in general, and that a re-union will yet take place among us.¹

Later on April 1st, Moore and Bradburn were agreeable to this plan drawn up by Benson during the week of March 21st; Benson says:

Today the committee met at Kingswood to settle the accounts of the quarter. We had Mr. Bradburn and Mr. Moore with us; and I read to them the plan of general pacification which I had drawn up. They agreed to it, with few exceptions; and if Mr. Mather, Mr. Thompson, and Mr. Pawson agree to it, they are willing that it should be printed with their names annexed. We had a friendly meeting; and I trust that peace and unanimity will return.²

¹Ibid., p.194.

²Ibid.

The only direct information on the substance of Benson's March 21st plan is given by John Pawson in a letter to Charles Atmore. Pawson, who rejected the plan outright, says:

.....it refused the administration of the sacrament to all societies, except where a majority of Trustees were in favour of it; where a majority of the Leaders desired it; and where a majority of the people, in general, had requested it. At this rate there would be endless confusion.¹

With the evidence from Pawson's letter alongside a declaration made by Benson at the District Meeting, one may venture to guess what the outlines of Benson's plan of March 21st must have included. From Pawson's letter, it appears that Benson had proposed that the Sacrament should be allowed to those societies where a majority of the trustees, leaders and people desire it. In addition, assuming that Benson had not altered his proposal given at the District Meeting:

That the Trustees of no chapel, ought to have power to refuse the Preachers the Conference, appoints, or to place and displace Preachers²,

the second main feature of his plan probably included a declaration that Conference alone had the right "to place and displace Preachers".

Despite the initial success of Benson's plan, the situation in Bristol remained unchanged, for on April 5th Benson writes:

¹Quoted in J. S. Stamp, "Memoirs of Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 327.

²Benson, Rodda and Vasey's Circular of September 26th, 1794.

I see no immediate prospect of a reconciliation at Bristol: but I trust a general division will be prevented.¹

It is noteworthy that the sacramental issue, which underlay the dispute and which had largely been obscured by the issue respecting Conference authority, again returned to the focal point as the bone of contention. This is clear from Pawson's reaction to Benson's plan. Both parties had agreed all along that Conference alone had the right to station preachers, and hence a settlement was delayed by disagreements over the use of the Sacrament.

In the meanwhile during the month of March, while Benson's plan was being discussed in Bristol, one circular appeared. This ill-timed and ill-thought-out circular, published on March 10th and signed "A Member of the Conference"² is the most flagrant which appeared during the entire period of dispute. Although the writer alludes to certain accusations which he says he has heard against Benson, Mather and the Manchester trustees, he makes no attempt to state them; instead he condemns his opponents with an unusual degree of acrimony.³

¹Treffry, p.193.

²"To the Methodist Preachers from a Member of the Conference". March 10th, 1795.

³Ibid. Benson, abbreviated by the writer as "Bens", is accused of a "rage of jealousy" regarding Bradburn, "mixed with a salamander quality, that enables him to live in the fire unconsumed". Mather, abbreviated "Math", is called "the man-headed Episcopal Hydra" and is represented as an "Alexander the Great" who is "filled with wild ambition, and the unquenchable thirst of empire".

The next circular appeared on April 16th from Aberdeen entitled "Minutes of the Aberdeen District Meeting of April 16th, 1795".¹ This letter, chiefly the handiwork of Alexander Kilham, the secretary, presents the proceedings of the Aberdeen meeting. Out of the twenty-nine articles into which the circular is divided, ten are related to the current issues in dispute. Indirectly the sixth article blames the Portland as well as the Room trustees for expelling preachers, but the other nine articles support the programme of the Portland party. The circular's approach to the dispute is essentially critical rather than conciliatory.

Sometime this same month, Pawson, Mather and Coke circulated in manuscript form a letter entitled, "Humble Proposals for Peace". The only information about this letter is that mentioned by George Smith, who simply describes the proposals as "moderate and conciliatory".²

During the latter part of April and the early part of May, there seems to have been little change on the Bristol scene. Apparently Bradburn was satisfied with Benson's plan, for on May 12th he wrote a letter to Joseph Sadler declaring, "Mr. Benson seems desirous of peace, and has consented to grant more than I expected".³ However, Alexander Mather was not so optimistic. On

¹The circular is signed by J. Sanderson, chairman, and A. Kilham, secretary.

²G. Smith, II, p.121.

³Quoted in Blanshard, Life of Bradburn, p.166.

the same day in which Bradburn wrote the above letter, Mather met with Charles Atmore in Halifax. Describing this conversation, Atmore says, "I had some.....conversation with him respecting the affairs of the Connexion; and am sorry to find that he anticipates a division in the body".¹

Three days later on May 15th, Mather, Thompson and Benson published "An Address to the Methodist Body at Large, and the Preachers in Particular"² in which fifteen proposals were made as a basis for a settlement. A paraphrase of these proposals is: First, that there shall be no ordination since reception into full connexion is sufficient proof of qualifications; Second, that no gowns, bands, surplices or the title Reverend shall be allowed; Third, that no alterations shall be made "of our Plan", such as the administration of the Sacrament unless it be "unanimously and earnestly desired by the Society in that place: that..... it will cause no division". Even then it should not be allowed where it will interfere with administration in the Church. Fourth, that Methodism shall "remain in connexion with the Church"; Fifth, that preachers shall be sent to those societies whose views on lay administration correspond; Sixth, that appointments of preachers shall be with Conference, and that no group of trustees, leaders or stewards shall expel a preacher unless for reasons of immorality,

¹Stamp, "Memoirs of Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol.68, pp.326-27.

²Mather, Thompson and Benson, "An Address to the Methodist Body at Large, and the Preachers in Particular". Bristol, May 15th, 1795.

lack of abilities, or preaching false doctrines; Seventh, that no district meeting or any private members shall alter the appointment of the assistant or preachers stationed in any circuit except for the reasons given in the sixth proposal; Eighth, that no one "take any steps towards building any.....Chapel.....without the consent of Conference first obtained"; Ninth, that "no Trust-Deed already.....approved by the Conference, be infringed on by any Preacher"; Tenth, that "the pulpit shall not be used.....as a vehicle for abuse towards any man" under the penalty of being "suspended" "as for an act of.....immorality"; Eleventh, that no publication shall be circulated without bearing the author's name; Twelfth (which is divided into three proposals), that no partiality shall be shown in either the appointment of preachers or the granting of money for preachers' children; that there shall be appointed "an executive government" to settle disputes between Conferences; and, finally, that Conference shall determine "proper penalties" for those who disregard its rules.¹

It is noteworthy that a letter to Benson by William Thompson from London dated February 26th, 1795, contains a plan of settlement² and that Thompson's entire plan is reflected in the above circular of May 15th. The May 15th proposals numbering 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12c are merely a rewording of those found in Thompson's

¹Ibid.

²Quoted in the Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, Vol.10, pp.74-75.

letter. The other proposals (i.e. 4, 5, 9, 10, 12a and 12b) are additions to those found in his letter. There is no way of telling whether Benson's plan of February 18th overlapped with that of Thompson's February 26th plan or not. Indeed, it is difficult to ascribe the plan outlined in the May 15th circular to any one of the three writers, for the interchange of ideas between the three men, particularly Benson and Thompson, had been taking place since September, 1794. Therefore, one can only safely assume that this finished plan was a joint work.

Along with their fifteen proposals, the writers state eight reasons against a division in Methodism and also present four principles on which they think their plan should be based. This basis includes the pre-eminence of peace above all issues, the demand that all preachers remain above all disputes, the call for all members of the Connexion to remain "in their proper places", and the strict observance of all Conference rules.¹

The May 15th circular was followed by a circular from Moore, Rutherford, Crowther and Grant on June 2nd.² Their circular begins by quoting an address "To the Whole Methodist Society in Bristol, and especially to the Itinerant and Local Preachers, Leaders, Stewards, and Trustees" which is dated May 28th, 1795, from

¹Mather, Thompson and Benson's circular of May 15th, 1795.

²This circular, published at Bristol on June 2nd, 1795, includes a letter from Mather and Pawson dated May 28th, 1795, and a letter from Moore, Rutherford, Crowther and Grant dated June 2nd, 1795.

Manchester, and is signed by Mather and Pawson. The latter parties express their regret that they cannot come personally to Bristol, but that they recommend four steps for the Bristol society to take. These steps include: a day of fasting and prayer by both parties, a forgetting and a forgiving of each other's grievances, a consideration of the sad effects which may come from the dispute, and finally a selection of a committee representing both sides to meet and put an end to the dispute.

After quoting Mather and Pawson's letter, Moore, Rutherford, Crowther and Grant express their regret over the division and their desire that "all that is past shall be forgotten". In a postscript they declare that "The Chapel (i.e. on King Street) will be openedthe 28th of this Month, and the fast day will be the Friday before".¹

Eight days later on June 10th, the Manchester, Salford and Stockport trustees published their third address.² They declare themselves in favour of Mather, Thompson and Benson's "general outlines, as a basis for the restoration and establishment of peace". However, the primary reason for their letter was to request that trustees and leaders throughout the Connexion appoint a:

Delegate to meet at Manchester on Friday the
24th of July next, at ten o'clock in the fore-
noon, in Oldham-street Chapel.....Let the

¹Ibid.

²"To the Trustees from the Manchester, Salford and Stockport Trustees". Manchester, June 10th, 1795. The circular is signed by twenty-three trustees from these three societies.

delegate be chosen by the Trustees and Leaders, who should have a letter of the views of the Trustees and Leaders.¹

Four topics to be discussed at this meeting are: whether "the 100 or the whole Assembly" shall have authority; the conditions for the introduction of the Sacrament; whether trustees and leaders should compose a district meeting; and whether trustees should expel preachers who infringe on chapel deeds or preach in unauthorised chapels.²

During the month of June, while Benson was away in Cornwall on a preaching tour³, the Bristol society seems to have been engrossed in the excitement over the completion of the new chapel on King Street. The chapel, which was opened on June 28th, was named Ebenezer after I Samuel 7:12. Though the decision to erect this chapel in defiance of Conference regulations was a daring move, and though the debts which it accumulated far exceeded the anticipated cost⁴, which debts were to linger for some time to come⁵, its erection met a growing need in Bristol Methodism. Out

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³See Treffry, pp.195-205 for a description of Benson's unusually successful preaching journey through Cornwall which began on June 2nd and ended by his return on July 3rd.

⁴The MS. Minute Book of King Street Chapel records that in November, 1795, £3364 was still owed on the chapel.

⁵Ibid., on February 24th, 1804, records that "an annual subscription to be set on foot to lessen the debts of the King St. and Portland Chapels and that $\frac{2}{4}$ of what is collected shall be applied to King Street and $\frac{1}{4}$ to Portland Chapel".

of the sixteen hundred members of the society registered in 1794, three hundred worshipped in the small New Room and Guinea Street Chapels, while the majority of the remaining thirteen hundred had only Portland and Castlegreen Chapels at their disposal.¹ Therefore, Ebenezer, which was much larger than the other chapels, gave relief to this great need for additional chapel space.²

During the month of July, four publications appeared prior to the convening of Conference on July 27th. The first circular was published from Bradford on July 8th.³ The circular, edited by three Bradford trustees, consists of a letter which had been written by nine trustees and stewards of the Trowbridge society, dated June 10th. The letter is, in part, directed against Benson, who, according to the Trowbridge writers, had been the chief instrument in introducing the Sacrament at Bradford and yet later had sided with the Church party in Bristol in its opposition to the Sacrament. The primary concern of the letter is to defend the writers themselves against certain charges which they had apparently received regarding

¹D. Male and J. Cook printed a programme for the occasion of its closing on 11th April, 1954, entitled "A Short History of Old King Street (Ebenezer) Methodist Church, Bristol, 1794-1954". In this programme they mention that fact stated in the text.

²After the destruction caused during the Second World War, the Bristol Town Planning Committee issued a compulsory purchase order to the trustees of King Street Chapel. The old chapel, whose demolition began on April 11th, 1954, contributed a stone which has since become the foundation stone of a new chapel now being erected.

³"To the Methodist Connexion at Large". Bradford, July 8th, 1795.

their part in a controversy over lay administration in Trowbridge.

This circular was followed by another on July 9th signed by "A Trustee" which is addressed to the assembly of trustees expected to meet in Manchester on July 24th.¹ The writer expresses his fear that ambition has motivated Mather, Thompson and Benson's plan of May 15th and he concludes by proposing that "Lay Delegates be added to the District" meetings as a safeguard to their plan.

Alexander Mather had been the subject of a great deal of criticism regarding personal ambition during the past five months. It is little wonder that this was so, because not only had he openly asserted that a division in the body was likely, but, as Mather himself discloses, he had declared that "If certain measures were pursued, I must either head a party against those measures, or withdraw".² Therefore, when on July 16th, Mather addressed a circular "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley, especially such of them who attend the ensuing Conference", he contends: "I now have not, nor ever had, any settled design of dividing the Preachers, or the People". After pledging his loyalty to Conference as the "sole" authority in the Connexion, he advises the preachers to use their "utmost endeavours to satisfy all

¹"An Address to the Methodist Ministers and Trustees, Expected to Meet in Manchester on Friday the Twenty-fourth of this Month". July 9th, 1795. Signed "A Trustee".

²A. Mather, "To the Preachers late in Connection with the Rev. John Wesley especially such of them who attend the ensuing Conference". Manchester, July 16th, 1795.

and to prove to all that we seek not our own, but the things that are Christ's".¹

Shortly after Mather's circular was published, a pamphlet, addressed to the Conference, was circulated by the Room trustees.² As its title "Primitive Methodism Defended" suggests, this thirty-six page pamphlet was intended to demonstrate that the policy of the Room trustees over the past four years arose solely from their attempts to safeguard "Primitive Methodism". The first nine pages include a reprint of two addresses sent in 1791 and in 1792 to Conference declaring an opposition to the sacramental innovation on the grounds that it would produce a separation from the Church. The remaining pages outline the measures of the Sacramentarian party in Bristol which threatened the Church relation and, according to the writers, necessitated either a stand against these measures or else an abandonment of "Primitive Methodism". In conclusion the trustees refer their readers to Wesley's "Reasons Against Separation from the Church of England" which they reprint in a postscript.

On July 24th, delegates from sixty-nine circuits met at Oldham Street Chapel in Manchester and resolved that "the most effectual Means to restore Peace.....would be to place all Things

¹Ibid.

²"Primitive Methodism Defended". Bristol, W. Pine and Son, July, 1795.

on the Ground on which they stood at Mr. Wesley's Death".¹ Since it was thought that this might prove "impracticable", the meeting suggested the following ten resolutions for Conference's consideration:

1. That the Preachers be kept.....out of all disputes.
2. That the Preachers.....Trustees.....Leaders and Stewards.....have their due share of power.
3. That the appointment of Preachers be in the Conference.
4. That the Hundred.....are the only legal Persons that constitute that body.
5. That no alteration shall take place.....respecting.....the Sacrament.....until first certified to the Conference by a majority of the Trustees, three-fourths of the Leaders and Stewards, and.....the People.
6. That where the Sacrament is permitted, it should be administered.....in the Evening, and to the Society only.
7. That any Preacher who breaks the Rules of Conference.....shall be suspended.
8. That the conduct of Dr. Coke, Messrs. Moore, Bradburn, Rutherford, Crowther, and Grant.....ought to be censured by Conference.
9. That the opposition Chapels built at Bristol and Chester, contrary to the Rules of Conference, ought not to be admitted into the Methodist's Connection.
10. That.....the introduction of preaching in Church hours, and the administration of the Sacrament.....be given up in all places, where the union and concord of the Society is disturbed thereby.²

Conference was scheduled to open on Monday, July 27th, with Benson having been chosen to address the gathering on the Sunday,

¹"Minutes of the Proceedings of the Delegates Deputed from the Trustees and People, of a Large Number of Chapels in the Methodist Connection, met at Manchester, on the 24th of July, 1795". Bristol, W. Pine and Son, 1795, p.13.

²Ibid., pp.13-15.

the day before. Choosing Eph. 4:3 "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" as his text, Charles Atmore says that Benson "preached a most excellent sermon, which I believe did much good".¹ On Monday, Conference, which "was more numerously attended than any previous one"², officially opened with "a day of solemn and real fasting and prayer".³ On Tuesday morning of July 28th, Conference began its proceedings with each preacher in full connexion being given a slip of paper with instructions to write down a choice of nine preachers who should serve on a committee for the purpose of drawing up a plan of settlement. After Mather and Pawson had counted the votes, they announced that Joseph Bradford, John Pawson, Alexander Mather, Thomas Coke, William Thompson, Samuel Bradburn, Joseph Benson, Henry Moore, and Adam Clarke had been selected for this committee.⁴ Following this, the president, Joseph Bradford, read a letter written by the trustee delegates who had assembled at Oldham Street Chapel, and it was decided that at 10 a.m. on the morning of July 29th, Conference would hear and consider their ten proposals.⁵

¹Quoted in Stamp, "Memoirs of Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 328.

²Burroughs, Ebenezer, p. 35.

³Minutes of Conference, I, p. 321.

⁴Ibid., p. 322. See also Stamp, p. 329.

⁵"Minutes of the Proceedings of the Delegates met at Manchester on the 24th of July", pp. 8-9.

Apparently the morning of July 29th was set aside for receiving all of the various groups which had assembled in Manchester to present petitions to the Conference, because after the resolutions of the Oldham Street Chapel delegates had been heard, Conference gave its attention to certain propositions presented by delegates headed by Michael Longridge from the Sunderland circuit¹ and also to a petition read by Samuel Waterhouse.² Waterhouse's petition, signed by five leaders and one hundred and twenty members of the Halifax society, declared that:

any deviation from the old plan, by introducing the sacraments, would have a tendency to hurt, if not destroy, the work of God; that, in their consciences, they could not agree to it; and that they were determined to abide by, and support the old plan only.³

In the meanwhile the select committee of nine preachers, having first met on the evening of July 28th,

met six evenings successively: and sat each evening, after all the fatigues of the Conference, for about three hours and a half. Their plan was at last completed, and laid before the Conference; who, with the alteration of a single article, passed them unanimously. After this, two or three articles more were agreed upon, under the title of Addenda, in order to give the completest satisfaction, and to remove every obstacle to a lasting peace.⁴

¹This is inferred from a letter from these delegates to the Conference dated August 3rd and quoted in the Minutes of Conference, I, p. 327.

²Stamp, "Memoirs of Atmore", p. 326.

³Ibid.

⁴Minutes of Conference, I, p. 322.

This plan of settlement, known as "Articles of Agreement for General Pacification", is divided into two divisions: "I. Concerning the Lord's Supper, Baptism, &c." and "II. Concerning Discipline".

The first division has the following ten articles:

1. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper shall not be administered in any chapel, except the majority of the Trustees of that chapel on the one hand, and the majority of the Stewards and Leaders belonging to that chapel (as the best qualified to give the sense of the people) on the other hand, allow of it. Nevertheless, in all cases, the consent of the Conference shall be obtained, before the Lord's Supper be administered.

2. Wherever there is.....no chapel, if the majority of the Stewards and Leaders of that society testify, that it is the wish of the people.....their desire shall be gratified.

3.in all.....chapels where the Lord's Supper has been already peaceably administered, the administration of it shall be continued in future.

4.Baptism, the Burial of the Dead, and Service in Church-hours, shall be determined according to the regulations above-mentioned.

5. Wherever the Lord's Supper shall be administeredit shall always be continued, except the Conference order the contrary.

6. The Lord's Supper shall be administered by those only who are authorised by the Conference; and at such times, and in such manner only, as the Conference shall appoint.

7.Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.....is intended only for the members of our own Society.

8. We agree, that the Lord's Supper be administered among us, on Sunday evenings only: except where the majority of the Stewards and Leaders desire it in church-hours; or where it has already been administered in those hours. Nevertheless, it shall never be administered on those Sundays, on which it is administered in the Parochial Church.

9. The Lord's Supper shall be always administered in England, according to the form of the Established Church: but the person who administers, shall have full liberty to give out hymns, and to use exhortation and ex-temporary prayer.

10. Wherever Divine Service is performed in England, on the Lord's day in Church-hours, the officiating Preacher shall read either the Service of the Established Church, our venerable father's Abridgement, or at least, the Lessons appointed by the Calendar. But we recommend either the full Service, or the Abridgement.¹

The second division "Concerning Discipline", made up of eight articles, resolved:

1. The appointment of Preachers shall remain solely with the Conference; and no Trustee, or number of Trustees, shall expel or exclude from their chapel or chapels, any Preacher so appointed.

2.if the majority of the Trustees, or.....the Stewards and Leaders of any Society, believe that any Preacher appointed for their Circuit, is immoral, erroneous in the doctrines, deficient in abilities, or that he has broken any of the rules above-mentioned, they shall have the authority to summon the Preachers of the District, and all the Trustees, Stewards, and Leaders of the Circuit, to meet in their chapel..... The Chairmen of the District shall be President of the assembly: And if the majority of the meeting judge, that the accused Preacher (is guilty of any of the above charges) he shall be considered as removed from that Circuit: and the District-Committee shall.... appoint another Preacher for that Circuit.....

3. If any Preacher refuse to submit to the above mode of trial.....he shall be considered as suspended till the Conference. And if any Trustees expel from any chapel, a Preacher, by their own separate authority, the Preachers appointed for that Circuit, shall not preach in that chapel till the ensuing Conference, or till a trial take place, according to the mode mentioned above.

¹Ibid., pp.322-23.

4. If any Trustee expel.....a Preacher, by their own separate authority.....the Chairman of the District shall summon the members of the District-Committee, the Trustees of that Circuit who have not offended, and the Stewards and Leaders of the Circuit. And the members of such assembly shall examine into the evidence.....and if the majority of them determine, that the state of the Society.....requires that a new chapel should be built previous to the meeting of the Conference, every proper step shall be immediately taken for erecting such a chapel. And no step shall on any account be taken, to erect a chapel for such purposes, before the meeting of the Conference, till such meeting be summoned, and such determination be made.

5. No Preacher shall be suspended or removed from his Circuit by any District-Committee, except he have the privilege of the trial before-mentioned.

6. The hundred Preachers mentioned in the enrolled Deed, and their successors, are the only legal persons, who constitute the Conference.

7.any Preacher who shall disturb the peace of the Society, by speaking for or against the introduction of the Lord's Supper.....or concerning the old or new plan, so called, shall be subject to the trial and penalties before-mentioned.

8.if any Local Preacher, Trustee, Steward, or Leader, shall disturb the peace of the Society, by speaking for or against the introduction of the Lord's Supper, or concerning the old or new plan, so called, the Superintendent of the Circuit, or the majority of the Trustees, Stewards, and Leaders of the Society so disturbed, shall have authority to summon a meeting of the Travelling Preachers of the Circuit, and the Trustees, Stewards, and Leaders of that Society. Evidence shall be examined on both sides; and if the charge be proved, the Superintendent Preacher shall expel from the Society the person so offending.¹

The "Addenda" consists of the following six articles:

¹Ibid., pp. 323-25.

1. The Conference, by no means, wishes to divide any Society, by the introduction of the Lord's Supper, and therefore expect that the majority of the Stewards and Leaders, who desire the Lord's Supper among themselves, testify in writing to the Conference, that they are persuaded no separation will be made thereby.
2. The Sacrament shall not be administered to a Society in any private house, within two miles of any Methodist chapel, in which it is regularly administered.
3.the pulpit shall not be a vehicle of abuse.
4.never.....appoint or remove a Leader or Steward, without first consulting the Leaders and Stewards of the Society.
5.no pamphlet or printed letter shall be circulated.....without the author's name, and the postage or carriage paid.
6. Nothing contained in these rules, shall be construed to violate the rights of the Trustees, as expressed in their respective deeds.¹

One contemporary source, Jonathan Edmondson, maintains that the plan "which I drew up for Mr. Thompson is substantially the same as that which was finally adopted by the Conference"², while another source asserts that the plan of Mather, Thompson and Benson of May 15th "constituted the groundwork of the celebrated 'Plan of Pacification'".³ However, an examination of the plan

¹Ibid., pp. 325-26.

²A letter from Jonathan Edmondson to the Editor of the Methodist Magazine, 1835, Vol. 58, p. 131.

³Atmore's journal, quoted in Stamp, p. 327. A comparison of the two plans, i.e. Mather, Thompson and Benson's and the Plan of Pacification, shows that they are related in the following sections. The former plan's proposals numbering 9, 10 and 11 appear in the latter's

shows that it differs in several respects from previous plans, which suggests that it was the joint work of the entire committee.

The articles contained in the section on "Discipline" had been anticipated and were, for the most part, readily endorsed by both sides. The first and most important article, affirming Conference's right to station preachers, represented both parties' views and was expected, while the sixth article only reiterated the accepted view that "the Hundred" comprised the legitimate Conference. Articles two¹ and four², modifications of previous Conference decisions, and articles three and five all represent concessions and, at the same time, disapproval of the actions of both parties in Bristol. However, these four articles were mainly a security against future disturbances of a similar nature. As feeling would still run high regarding the use of the Lord's Supper, the remaining two articles under the section on "Discipline", seven and eight,

addenda: articles 6, 3, and 5. Also, proposal 6 of the former plan is related to article 2, section II of the latter. Certainly, articles one and four under section I and article one under the Addenda reflect proposals in the former plan. Admittedly, the text of Mather, Thompson, and Benson does not convey clearly these last two corresponding features. Rather it is the postscript added to their plan that indicates their intentions more exactly. This postscript says:

The plan we recommend above has evidently many advantages It grants any Society preaching in Church hours, or the sacrament from their own Preachers, as soon as a majority of the Trustees, and of the Stewards, and Leaders, who are on the spot, and are the best able to judge what will be for the good of the work, petition the Conference for it, and the people are so agreed among themselves, that they can have it with peace.

¹See Minutes of Conference, I, p. 300.

²See Ibid., pp. 276-77.

were necessarily severe, and, in the light of the situation, they seem justified as legitimate means for avoiding the possibility of future trouble. The Addenda, chiefly concerned with discipline, were prudent additions to the original plan presented by the select committee; these six articles incorporate some of the general lessons which had been learned from the Bristol Dispute.

In the first section containing the sacramental resolutions, the articles were more controversial. The 1793 decision had allowed the Sacrament "where the whole Society is unanimous for it, and will not be contented without it"; the 1794 decision had allowed it where "the union and concord of the Society" cannot "be preserved without it", while this Conference permits it where the majority of the Trustees on the one hand, and a majority of the Stewards and Leaders on the other hand, allow it. This latter decision, which appears to have originated with Benson¹, seems to reflect a concession in the direction of the Church party. For instance, the 1794 resolution may be interpreted as granting the Sacrament to those societies where a minority in favour of it disturb "the union and concord of the Society", while the latter resolution required at least a majority of the society's trustees, who were disproportionately composed of Churchmen, and even then it was imperative that

¹Benson's March 21st plan as described by John Pawson. Quoted in Stamp, *Memoirs of Atmore*", p.327.

it (Benson's plan) refused the administration of the sacrament to all societies, except where a majority of Trustees were in favour of it; where a majority of the Leaders desired it; and where a majority of the people, in general, had requested it.

a statement should be submitted declaring that no division in the society would result from the innovation.¹ Conference further prescribed, in addition to the articles "Concerning the Lord's Supper", that "The Lord's Supper shall be administered by the Superintendent only, or such of his Helpers as are in full connexion, as he shall appoint.....".²

One of the great values of the 1795 resolution over its predecessors was its wording in clear and unmistakable terms.

Foremost in the mind of Conference in making its sacramental resolutions was the desire to preserve the Connexional unity and to avoid the possibility of a future crisis similar to that precipitated from Bristol. Hence, nine of the ten articles under the sacramental section are, in the main, a collective restatement of previous rulings that were likely to be accepted. Conference passed over the Sacramentarian party's view that the Sacrament should be granted where the majority of the people desire it, because this could not have avoided open discussions on the subject with leaders on each side of the issue exerting their influence, and serious developments might again occur. A fear of such developments is reflected in the seventh and eighth articles under Discipline. These articles prohibit preachers, local preachers, trustees, stewards, and class leaders from publicly "speaking for or against the Lord's Supper".

¹Addenda, Article One.

²Minutes of Conference, I, p. 319.

Certainly with the opinion on the innovation varying from one society to another, Conference was obliged to make certain restrictions and to leave the ultimate decision up to the individual societies. Since it was not expedient to place it in the hands of the people, Conference resolved to leave it to the decision of a closed meeting between trustees on the one hand and stewards and leaders on the other "(as the best qualified to give the sense of the people)".¹ This measure, when joined to articles seven and eight under the section on discipline, appears to have been the most prudent means of safeguarding against society rifts. The fact that the innovation required a majority of trustees gratified the Church party, thus providing an additional precaution against future disturbances.

The "Articles of Agreement for General Pacification" were unanimously passed by the 1795 Conference.² Macdonald says that "several of the old Trustees" of the Church party felt that "Primitive Methodism" had been abandoned and expected Benson to "secede from the Connexion at the head of a party of Preachers sufficient to occupy all their chapels".³ The group led by Samuel Waterhouse of Halifax did secede.⁴ However, the vast

¹Article One under "Concerning the Lord's Supper".

²Minutes of Conference, I, p. 322.

³Macdonald, p. 273.

⁴Stamp, "Memoirs of C. Atmore", Methodist Magazine, Vol. 68, p. 326.

majority of the Church party, including the Oldham Street delegates¹ and even the Room trustees², agreed to the sacramental resolutions. Thus with the adoption of this plan of pacification the year of crisis, during which time the unity of the Connexion had hung in the balance, was brought to an end. Conference had reaffirmed its right to appoint and remove preachers and had in unmistakable language, prescribed where, when and by whom the Sacrament should be administered.

¹"Minutes of the Proceedings of the Delegates.....met at Manchester, on the 24th of July, 1795". See the letter from these delegates to the Conference printed in Minutes of Conference, I, pp. 326-27.

²Macdonald, p. 277.

CONCLUSION

It is proposed to discuss the Bristol Dispute and its natural terminus, the Plan of Pacification, from the perspective of the 1795 Conference. From the vantage point of that particular time, after the fluctuations and often misleading arguments in the dispute itself had occurred, the discussion will aim at evaluating the important issues which have emerged out of this reconstruction of the Dispute. It is proposed that the answer to three questions be attempted. First, what was the real position held by the two parties on these important issues? Second, what was the essential basis of disagreement? And third, how did the Plan of Pacification deal with the problems involved? In order to do this the issues will be isolated, as nearly as possible, so that conclusions to their relative significance may be more clearly drawn. However, to receive the most accurate impression of the evaluation it would be well to bear in mind their constant interaction.

It is also proposed to discuss the role of Joseph Benson as revealed through this investigation. All possible detail has been presented to illumine Benson the man and pinpoint the decision he had to make in this dispute. An attempt will be made to assess his role in the light of this new evidence; the purpose of such discussion being to conclude with more accuracy the real significance of Benson's part in the Dispute.

During the "Circular War" charges and counter-charges were made

by the two parties regarding issues on which they were basically in agreement. In this category falls the problem of Church relationship, an issue often referred to by the conservative Churchmen in accusing the liberal Sacramentarian group of deliberately striving to bring about a separation from the Church. The assumption that the Conservatives were trying to preserve the Church relationship directs the subject of the proof needed for this conclusion to a discussion of the position of the Liberals on the issue. After the Conservatives had become alarmed over the Liberals' sacramental views following Wesley's death and had accused them of abandoning the Old Plan by fostering a separation from the Church, the Liberals replied by pledging their loyalty to the Old Plan and the Church. They tried to justify their position by proving that the sacramental innovation was consistent with Wesley's plan. These impassioned cries of the Liberals that they did not wish to separate, in fact, that they held with respect the traditional Church relationship, have the ring of truth. The keynote to understanding the policy of the Liberals is to be found in their primary preoccupation with the Methodist movement. This complete dedication to what they believed to be the good of Methodism led them to foster policies which laid them open to the charge that they threatened the Church union. Accordingly, they reasoned that they could not check the momentum of the sacramental movement without stunting the growth of Methodism. Certainly the sacramental innovation was a serious problem involving the Methodist-

Anglican union, a problem, though, that had not arisen simply from the sacramental movement after Wesley's death. For Wesley himself had encountered it when he found it necessary to take measures which he called deviations from the Church, and the Liberals argued that they were merely following in Wesley's footsteps. Such reasoning when laid side by side with Wesley's previous logic on the issue is significantly parallel, and it follows that their affirmations of having no desire or plan for separation could be true. The difference between the two parties is that the Liberals, engrossed in Methodist affairs, did not consider the Church relation as a matter of first concern. This distinction can be stated that the Conservatives hoped the Church relation would continue while the Liberals hoped it could continue. But it can be concluded that during the period of the Bristol Dispute and at the 1795 Conference the Liberals, like the Conservatives, regardless of charges to the contrary, did not wish to sever the Church relation; in fact, they viewed the continuance of the union as desirable.

Of the variety of subjects referred to by the publications during the Circular War, the subject of Conference authority appeared most frequently. Like the issue respecting the Church relation, the issue regarding Conference authority arose from one party's alarm over the other's intended designs. Though the Sacramentarians' main accusation against the Conservatives was that they were attempting to usurp Conference authority, in reality it is concluded that neither of the two parties designed to threaten Conference authority. It

is thus concluded that on this issue the parties were basically in agreement. The issue was first spelled out when conservative trustees organised and sent delegates to pressure the 1794 Conference against further innovations, while it was precipitated when the Room trustees expelled Henry Moore from their chapels. The fact is, trustees desired the supremacy of Conference and the continuation of the itinerant plan, for trustees not only recognised these as important features of the Old Plan, but the authority of Conference itself was a safeguard for trustees' rights and views. One of the important points which this thesis has tried to prove is that the motive behind the Room trustees' action against Henry Moore stemmed from personal reasons. That they were not attempting to usurp power from Conference is evidenced from the manner in which they tried to justify their action on the basis of Moore's violations of Conference, publicly pledged their own loyalty to Conference, offered to alter their deeds in an effort to prove this loyalty, and finally fought the dispute out on the basis of the Conference violations of the Portland party.

Likewise, trustees throughout the Connexion after the flare-up, even those who favoured the sacramental innovation, were unanimous in pledging their support to the itinerant plan and in appealing one way or other to Conference rules to denounce their opponents. On the basis of this, and contrary to previous investigations, it is concluded that both sides were in agreement in that neither designed to usurp Conference authority or question its right to appoint

preachers. Indeed, it is maintained that the issue over Conference authority, wherein both sides pledged their loyalty to Conference and appealed to its regulations in attacking the other, added weight if anything to Conference's prestige and confirmed its leadership over the Connexion.

If the ambition of trustees did not include usurping Conference's right to appoint preachers, then what factors led the preachers to accuse them of this? Admittedly trustees did have designs, but they were more subtle than the charges against them asserted. The truth appears to lie in that, since trustees were wealthier men and leading figures in their societies as well as their communities, they wanted to help shape the policy of Methodism, and they expected Conference to consider their opinions. The fact that many of them were conservative was incidental. The essential thing was their desire to influence Conference's decisions, not to usurp its authority; and the same was true, though to a lesser extent, of stewards and leaders.

The desire of trustees, exemplified at the 1794 Conference, to have a part in the affairs of the Connexion, was also true on the local scene, and it appears to have been the basic contention behind the Portland party's actions in Bristol. The Portland party was not at odds with the Room trustees because of their conservative views; rather, it was a result of their constant interference in Portland affairs and their expectation to be conferred with regarding all important affairs in Bristol. The Room trustees' expulsion of

Moore for administering at Portland Chapel was seen as a dramatic addition to this "meddling" or "domination", as the Portland party called it, and in this action of the trustees, the latter saw their opportunity of putting an end to this "domination". In the heat of dispute it was a short and easy step from regarding the trustees' actions as an interference to regarding the expulsion of Moore as an attempt to dictate to Conference and usurp the right to appoint preachers. Since there were similar cases involving constant trustee interference elsewhere, as is evidenced by the publications from trustees themselves, it is little wonder that the charge against trustees was so readily responded to and was echoed throughout the Connexion.

In their struggle with the Room trustees the Portland party successfully convinced themselves that trustees all over the Connexion desired to usurp Conference's right to station the preachers, and so they determined upon an all out war against trustees. For this reason they felt obliged to refuse the offers for a settlement made by the Room trustees. The effect which their enormous financial commitments had upon their rejection of peace cannot be fully estimated. Surely the preachers involved would not have perpetuated a dispute simply to ease these commitments, but the fact that it had some bearing on their attitude is unquestionable.

Therefore, it may be concluded that there was a real contention which the Portland party and its supporters had against trustees. However, the explanation of this contention does not lie in a trustee

desire to usurp Conference authority and its right to station preachers; rather it lies in a trustee desire to influence Conference decisions and to share in Connexional affairs. The charges against trustees and the resulting issue was an exaggeration of trustee aspirations; yet there was a problem involved which had to be reckoned with by the 1795 Conference.

Although trustees were aspiring to gain a greater share in Connexional affairs in general, this was not a new development in itself, but it was brought to the attention of the Connexion by their organised effort to resist the sacramental innovation, and this innovation was the essential and immediate problem behind the 1794-95 crisis. Though both Conservatives and Liberals respected the Church relation, and though both pledged their support to the Old Plan, the division between the two lay in their interpretation of the Old Plan regarding the sacramental innovation. The positions of the two on this subject were incompatible. This was acutely felt by Conference, because the policy of both parties was basically religious and not political. The difficulty of pacifying both elements to preserve Methodist unity had been keenly felt by the 1793 and 1794 Conferences whose resolutions on the innovation were only meant to be temporary solutions. However, with the Bristol crisis hovering overhead the 1795 Conference was forced to take a more final and clear-cut stand. Since the full claims of neither could be met, the main problem facing this Conference was how to satisfy both sides and avoid a future sacramental crisis.

Turning to the manner in which the 1795 Conference met the problems and issues involved in the Bristol crisis, one first observes that there is no direct mention of the subject of the Church relation in either the Minutes or the Plan of Pacification. Although few of the preachers at this Conference desired separation, most of them must have been aware that the Plan of Pacification was a step in this direction. In Conference's first deviation from the discipline of the Establishment in 1793, the assembly of preachers felt obliged to explain and they drew upon the old Wesleyan logic of asserting a Church loyalty and of designating their decision as a deviation brought about by necessity. However, the emergency of the 1794-95 crisis had shifted Conference's attention away from the subject of a possible separation from the Church to the more urgent subject of a possible separation within Methodism itself. This thought determined the orientation of the 1795 Conference and necessitated measures that would preserve Methodist unity. Although it is safe to assume that the 1795 Conference respected the Methodist-Anglican relation and held a desire for its continuation, nevertheless the Plan of Pacification's sacramental resolutions helped to pave the way for the weakening of Church ties and served as one of the most important land marks of Methodism's gradual separation.

The second issue, relating to Conference authority and the itinerant plan, was squarely faced and settled by the Plan of Pacification re-affirming Conference's right to appoint preachers.

There was no problem in this decision, because Conference's authority had gained from the dispute and was at a peak. In fact, it may be said that this decision had been already determined during the dispute itself by both sides declaring its loyalty to the itinerant plan and appealing to Conference rules to attack its opponents. Therefore, the Plan of Pacification, if not the crisis itself, settled once and for all Conference's legitimate claim of leadership in the Connexion.

The third concern of the 1795 Conference related to the trustees' desire to have a part in Connexional affairs. Rights of trustees were extended by the Plan of Pacification in Conference allowing them to take steps to guard against preachers who fail in their obligations to either Conference or the societies. Also trustees were granted the right to help determine on the sacramental innovation for their societies. Both of these privileges were given to stewards and leaders as well, but it is significant in granting these rights, Conference prescribed them under certain restrictions so that its own ultimate authority over the Connexion was retained. Although these measures gratified the trustees, their inherent desire to share in Methodist polity was something which would continue and increase, and it was a problem which proceeding Conferences would have to face.

The sacramental issue was the main root of the 1794-95 crisis, and it was the most difficult subject this Conference had to contend with. It was a basic problem that could not be solved by a single

Conference's decrees, but the 1795 Conference recognised the problem as is apparent from the settlement being called "Articles of Agreement for General Pacification". One of the strong points of this settlement was that its resolutions, which were expressed in unambiguous language, satisfied both Liberals and Conservatives, while another strong feature is that disciplinary measures were included which for the most part secured the Connexion from a future sacramental crisis. Therefore, the Plan of Pacification brought the sacramental issue to a close.

On the other hand, there was one apparent shortcoming in the Plan of Pacification and the difficulty here lay not so much in the plan itself as in the immediate insolubility of the sacramental problem. If the sacramental issue had virtually come to an end, the problem behind it was inherent and could only be rectified by time itself. The incompatible position of Liberals and Conservatives on this subject was not merely among preachers and trustees; it was to be found in the grass-roots of Methodism itself. Certainly, administration by the Methodist preachers was a part of the spirit of Methodism and was inevitable, but the long tradition against it could not be easily set aside. Indeed, many of the preachers were reluctant to administer even where the privilege had been granted. Ties with the Church were still strong in 1795 and so only after many years was administration by all Methodist preachers to become acceptable in all Methodist chapels.

Special attention has been given to Joseph Benson in this thesis

because his role has been misunderstood and the importance of it in the Bristol Dispute has not been appreciated. As it has been seen, the secondary sources maintain that Benson was opposed to the sacramental innovation and that he took sides with the Room trustees on the basis of this. The evidence has revealed that Benson did respect the sacramental wishes of the Room trustees, as he did the views of the Church party throughout the Connexion, but this does not indicate that Benson himself was opposed to the innovation. On the contrary the publications of the Sacramentarian party during the dispute prove without doubt that Benson was in favour of the innovation. In fact, the view that admission into the Methodist ministry sufficiently qualified a preacher to administer the sacraments, which was Conference's policy for nearly half a century, appears to have been originated by Benson.

To most of Benson's contemporaries the sacramental issue was cut and dried; one was either for or against the innovation. Therefore, when Benson exhibited his readiness at the 1794 Conference to forbear administering the Sacrament in order to avoid trouble with the Room trustees, many of his contemporaries concluded that he had changed his views and had joined sides with the trustees in opposing the innovation. Hence, they spoke of Benson's "inconsistency", his "present unaccountable conduct" and of "Benson against Benson".

In order to understand Benson's actions in Bristol, one must understand his attitude toward sacramental controversy, as distinct from sacramental innovation. In a word, he was in favour of the

innovation, but he did not believe in becoming involved in conflict to have it installed. How clearly this is seen in his words twenty-three years after the Bristol Dispute when he was appointed by Conference to settle the Irish Methodist sacramental controversy. He says, "All divisions among the people of God are pregnant with mischief"; "rather than continue to contend about a matter, certainly not essential to salvation either way", "I.....have most earnestly desired.....that the parties would compromise matters in some way or other". And he adds, "why may not this be done on some such ground as our Plan of Pacification?"¹

Benson's real stand on the sacramental innovation arose from his aim to preserve peace and unity in Methodism. His position was aptly expressed by one of his opponents in the 1794-95 dispute when he said that Benson favoured the innovation where it was likely to do good and be received peaceably. Thus, when Benson arrived in Bristol in September, 1794, he determined to respect the sentiments of both sides and, as he said, "to call the minds of both parties to that which is of infinitely more moment".

Benson was certainly an idealist, but it is significant that his approach to the problem was practical and realistic. Benson understood that the problem behind the innovation was deep-rooted, and that if the unity of Methodism was to be maintained, the time was not ripe for an all out stand in favour of the Sacrament. The matter had

¹Macdonald, pp.485-86.

to be left to the individual societies themselves. Therefore, realising that he as a preacher had to lead people with conflicting sacramental views along the same path, it was necessary that he give deference to the wishes of both. This is the explanation of Benson's stand on the sacramental issue.

As far as Conference authority is concerned, the evidence proves that Benson from the beginning of the dispute was careful that his actions would not be misconstrued as a trespass on Conference rules. But how did he view the violations of the other two parties in Bristol? Certainly the organised body of trustees at this time was of special concern to every preacher, and it appears to have been a familiar fact to Benson that trustees, as well as leaders and stewards, desired a voice in the affairs of the Connexion and even their opinions considered in the selection of the preachers sent to them. However, this did not convince Benson that trustees were attempting to usurp Conference's right to appoint preachers.

Being well acquainted with the Room trustees, Benson was aware that their discontentment had arisen from the struggle between the liberal and conservative elements in their circuit. The situation in Bristol was similar to that in the entire Connexion; the difference lay in that Bristol Conservatives had centred their concern on the figure of Henry Moore and that the tension between the two parties there had finally broken. Thus, before his arrival Benson recognised that the trustees had no intention of attacking Conference's right to station preachers, and his views were confirmed

when the trustees offered to alter their deeds and settle their chapels on the Conference plan. Regarding the Portland party, Benson did not believe that they intended to take Conference authority in their hands, as evidenced by his readiness to pass over their actions. Hence, at the District Meeting, when Benson had such high hopes of bringing the sides together, he did not accuse or condemn the Portland party but urged them to return to the status quo.

However, Benson did recognise that both sides had violated Conference regulation, and he publicly expressed his disapproval. Nor could he accept the condition given to him by the Portland party, not only because it was a threat similar to that given by the Room trustees to Moore at the 1794 Conference, but because in complying with the condition he himself would have been violating his own appointment. The logic of this was keenly felt by the Portland party, and Jonathan Crowther openly admitted it. Therefore, from the beginning of the dispute, Benson was careful to respect regulations. In not abandoning the Room and Guinea Street Chapels his actions could only be construed as upholding the authority of Conference. Benson was convinced that only within this framework of actions consistent with a respect for Conference authority, could any real peace be brought to Bristol. Thus it appears that during the autumn of 1794, out of all the leading figures in the Dispute, Benson alone emerged as the champion of Conference authority.

The importance of Benson's role in the Bristol Dispute can be

seen from the perspective of his decision to preach in the chapels of the Room trustees, and the significance which this decision had is in direct proportion to Benson's influential position as a leader in the Connexion. In its publications the Portland party repeatedly stressed that Benson's decision, in the light of his prestige, resulted in the controversy being perpetuated and the Bristol circuit being divided. They make it clear that if Benson had decided to abandon the Room and Guinea Street Chapels, the dispute would have been silenced and there would have been only one Bristol circuit; for these chapels and the Methodists who continued to worship in them would have been, practically speaking, severed from the Connexion.

If Benson had abandoned these chapels, and the Church party in Bristol were brought to their knees or else thrust from the Connexion, how would Churchmen in the Connexion have viewed this? If the situation is viewed from this perspective, the real significance of Benson's decision can be appreciated. Churchmen throughout the Connexion were aware that the majority of Methodists, as in Bristol, favoured the sacramental innovation, and they were following the sequence of events in Bristol with apprehension. The question was whether a Connexional settlement could be made which was acceptable to the Church party. Had Benson decided to abandon the Church party in Bristol, leaving them without a preacher, all hope for an acceptable settlement in Bristol would have disappeared and a permanent division in Bristol would have been likely. Since,

to Churchmen, Bristol was a dramatic representation of the clash between their own claims and those of the Sacramentarians, it was well that there were two Bristol circuits both connected to the life line of Methodism. For as long as Bristol Churchmen were not thrust out of the Connexion, at least the possibility of a settlement remained. Certainly Benson's decision did allow the dispute to be prolonged in Bristol, yet the differences between the two parties there, it would appear, needed time to work themselves out. And here lies one important function of the dispute; for the reconciliation in Bristol, with each party resolving to respect the wishes of the other, was a decisive example of the extremes of both parties remaining united under conditions that were acceptable to both. Accordingly the main significance of Benson's decision was that it kept those three hundred Bristol Church Methodists in the Connexion, thus holding out the possibility that in the eventual settlement the views of both Churchmen and Sacramentarians would be respected by Conference and the two groups could exist side by side.

If, as it has been seen, Benson's contemporaries indicated the importance of his influence during the Dispute, evidence also reveals that after the Dispute, his contemporaries appreciated his role and considered it successful. The fact that Conference later selected Benson to act as its personal representative to settle the Irish Sacramental Controversy can only be interpreted as a mark of confidence and a tribute to his role in helping to bring the Bristol Dispute to a successful conclusion.

This thesis has attempted to reconstruct the Bristol Dispute and arrive at a more correct understanding of its issues and the decisions which caused its progression. Out of this endeavour to understand more fully the details of the Dispute has come a clarification, and it is hoped, more correct assessment of Joseph Benson's role. The secondary sources' conclusions set against the primary sources' indications made the need for the thesis apparent. Thus it is believed that a period, hitherto obscure, has been clarified and an important milestone in Methodist Church history more correctly analysed.

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